

ONE OF HIS JEWELS.

BY A. RYCROFT TAYLOR.

1.

On the highway, some fifteen miles from the great centre of Lancashire industry, are two little tramps. It is early morning, and the raw November air strikes cold and chill into their poorly-clad limbs. The eldest, a girl about twelve years of age, is pale and thin, with a countenance suggestive of bad living and ill-usage. Her features are good and regular; intelligence gleams from her eyes; but there is a cowed, anxious expression in her face, as though on the constant look-out for a blow.

By her side, with his hand tightly clasped in hers, is her little brother, eight years old. He, too, is thin and pale, and bears signs of neglect, if not ill-usage. Poor children, they are wandering from home in search of a haven of peace and safety.

They are the children of a showman named Bulman, whose yellow caravan has followed the round of country fairs for many years. A man of violent passions and addicted to drink, he has, by his brutal behaviour, driven his meek, loving wife to her grave, and his children from home. Drink has become his ruling passion, and a long series of cruel beatings having terminated in an onslaught upon his timid child, which threatened her young life, a neighbourly showman had carried her senseless form from the caravan in the night, and, after bathing her bruised and bleeding limbs, had put her and her brother to bed; he and his good-hearted wife sleeping upon the floor of their wagon in order to give the children the rest they needed. In the early morning, after a good breakfast, their friend had advised them to tramp to Manchester, in order to avoid a worse fate, their father being past hope. Furnishing them with a little money and a little food to eat on their way, the showman put them on their journey, and bidding them keep up a good heart, had wished them well, saying to himself as he left them: "Poor little 'uns; it's very hard, it is, but they can't fare worse than they have, and they may do better."

The little tramps trudge along the damp highway, the keen, biting air nipping their hands and faces. Mattie tries to be cheerful and hopeful, but feels ready to cry at having left her father and home, bad and poor as they were.

"Mattie, where are we going, and why aren't we in the wagon?" asks Willie.

"You won't cry, dear, if I tell you; will you?"

"No."

"Well, we are running away from father," with a stifled sob.

"What for, Mattie?"

"Because he beat me so dreadfully last night. They thought I was dead. I am so sore, and my limbs do so ache. Mr. Williams said we must run away, as father might kill us both some night when he was tipsy."

"Did he hurt you much, Mattie?"

"Yes, dear; more than ever before; he didn't know what he was doing, so we mustn't think bad of him."

Think bad of him! this child with an angel's heart, would have gone back then, whilst her poor little head and arms and legs were aching and stiff with his ruffianly blows, and have kissed him, inwardly forgiving and willing to trust him again. But she felt she was doing right in taking Willie away from such scenes. He might perhaps beat him on some of these occasions, then her heart would break, she thought. Yes, they would go on. So on they go, slowly following the bend of the road, asking their way every now and then, and meeting many a surprised look as they tell their destination. Many and various are the questions Willie asks: "What sort of a place are they going to, and what are they going to do?" It passes the time on a little, and makes the journey less wearisome to Mattie trying to answer him. She has to draw upon her imagination a good deal, but it satisfies the child, and no harm is done. They stop here and there at the milestones, and rest, without understanding the significance of the inscription upon them. After travelling what seems to both a very great way, Willie says he is hungry, so they stop by a little ivy-covered church, and the gate being open, Mattie lends the way to a low, flat tombstone, and they sit down and eat some of the food the showman's wife gave them. The church and the graves make Mattie think of her mother, dead and buried in a similar place, and tears come into her

eyes as she thinks how lonely and friendless they will be now.

After resting awhile they again set out on their journey; with many a stoppage they manage to keep it up until night comes on, and it is quite dark. They are both tired out and footsore. Willie says he cannot walk any further, and is frightened at being on the dark highway by themselves. Mattie, too, is stiff and weary, but is anxious to go a little further, hoping they may come to some cottage where they can rest. She kisses her brother and bids him not cry, and try to be brave a little longer. In a while they see a light glimmering not far off. Encouraged, they push on towards it. They draw near, a flood of light pours across the dark road, and reveals from an open door the snug, warm interior of a wayside cottage.

"Oh, Mattie, if they would only let us go in, I am so cold and tired," says Willie, looking across the road into the light, cheerful room.

Summoning up her courage, Mattie crosses the road, and tapping timidly at the door, stands with beating heart waiting for some one to answer her. A woman with a child in her arms appears, and seeing two children shivering in the cold, exclaims, "Mercy on us, children, where have you come from on such a night as this?"

"If you please, we are cold and tired; we have been walking all day; will you let us rest and warm ourselves a bit?" says Mattie, looking eagerly into the woman's face.

"Bless me, yes, come in, and welcome." So they follow her and stand timidly inside the door.

"Nay, don't be frightened, come up to the fire," giving Mattie a chair and placing a stool by the fire for Willie to sit upon.

"You'll be hungry, I daresay," says the woman, going to the cupboard and fetching some new milk, and bread-and-butter, and bidding them eat while they rest and warm themselves. She is naturally curious to know what they are doing walking all day. Mattie, gaining courage, explains as well as she can how it is they have run away from home. The woman's sympathy is roused, and on her husband's coming into the room, she says:—

"John, here's two poor little ones, without mother, have had to run away from a bad father, who beats 'em. They are going to Manchester. Can't thee give 'em a bit to-night?"

"Aye, I daresay I can. Run away from a bad father, have they? that's a pity, it is."

"What time shall thee start, John?"

"Why, about twelve, so as to get to the market about three."

"Then they can have a nice sleep by the fire for an hour or two; it will rest and warm 'em."

So when they have finished their bread-and-milk, she pulls an old-fashioned sofa towards the fire; giving the baby to her husband to hold, she puts Mattie at one end and Willie at the other, and throws a big shawl over them, and bids them sleep until the wagon is ready.

Oh! how warm and cheerful the ruddy fire looked after the cold, dark highway; how brightly the lamp burned; how merrily the cricket chirped; how homely and comfortable the cottager and his wife looked—he quietly smoking his pipe in the chimney-corner, she rocking her baby to sleep, while she steadily plied her knitting-needles. Mattie, as she took in the warmth and comfort of the scene, fell fast asleep.

At twelve o'clock the wagon stands at the door ready loaded with vegetables. It is Friday night, and they are intended for the early-morning market at Shudehill. Mattie and her brother are roused up, and find the cottager sat at table drinking coffee and eating bread-and-butter. His wife gives them each a mug, and bids them drink it to keep them warm; then the lamp is taken to the door, and there stands the wagon, with two horses attached, the one before the other. At the top of the load the cottager makes a hollow, and spreads some bags; his wife lifts Mattie and Willie up, one at a time, and they are drawn up by her husband, and deposited in the hollow, and covered with an old woollen shawl. Mattie wraps it well about them, nearly covering Willie's head, so as to keep off the raw night air.

When all is ready, the carter bids them keep quiet, saying they need not be afraid of falling off; then cracks his whip, and the wagon starts off at a slow pace on its journey. They soon get cosy and warm, and fall asleep, and do not awake until the wagon stops at its destination."