

MY WINDOW-IVY.

Over my window the ivy climbs,
Its roots are in homely jars;
But all day long it looks at the sun,
And all night it looks at the stars.

The dust of the room may dim its green,
But I call the breezy air;
"Come in, come in, good friend of mine!
And make my window fair."

So the ivy thrives from morn till morn,
Its leaves all turned to the light;
And it gladdens my soul with its tender green,
And teaches me day and night.

What though my lot is in lowly place,
And my spirit behind the bars?
All the long day I may look at the sun,
And at night look out at the stars.

What though the dust of earth would dim it,
There's a glorious outer air
That will sweep through my soul if I let it in,
And make it fresh and fair.

Dear God! let me grow from day to day
Clinging and sunny and bright!
Though planted in shade, thy window is near,
And my leaves may turn to the light.

MARY MAPES DODGE.

A FRENCH SPECULATION.

III.

The houses sprang up—a faint smell of fresh-painted *jalousies* filled the air—the sea and sky grew blue—all the golden gorse bloomed, faded and died—the time of lilacs passed—and two dim Judas-trees which adorned the Casino gardens burst into their leafless flower. The season ought to be beginning soon. Monsieur Legros worked harder than ever. Morning, noon, and night he was out in pursuit of his workmen. One day a tenant arrived in the shape of a weary, old, grey-headed man. He rented one room, *au-cinquième*, of the small *pension* which was just finished, and wrote up a modest little placard, announcing himself as a music-master.

"It is well to be first in the field," he said to Blanche, "in a great future success like St. Didier." And Monsieur Léon was added to the prospectuses as a famous singing and music master.

Then the moment came when the hot summer rush takes place from towns to the seaside,—Dieppe, Dinard, and Etretat, began to fill rapidly. Every day the St. Didier omnibuses went to meet the trains—every day Madame Berthe and Blanche stood with beating hearts to watch them come in. Often they told each other that the carriages were full—quite full; and then it would turn out that it was a picnic party from the town, or tourists who would sleep one night at the hotel.

One day Monsieur Legros said suddenly to his wife, "I suppose, in writing home to your father, you have told him all about our circumstances?"

"No, never, Camille," she answered. "I have kept your secrets. I knew that these things are important in the commerce."

Monsieur Legros bent down and kissed her. "Then do this more for me, *m'amie*," he said. "Write to him; paint the whole thing in the brightest colours. I do not want you to say more than the truth, of course—but tell him the promise of it all; that I am said to be the best of landlords—that the place is getting on and becoming known."

"I have told him of our hopes, Camille; why should you wish me to say more?"

Monsieur Legros hesitated a moment, then he gave a little impatient stamp.

"For a *bourgeoise* you are wonderfully dull, *m'amie*. Do you not perceive that I want him to invest some portion of your future fortune in this manner?"

"Ah! but I fear that I could not advise him to do that," said Blanche, gravely. Her husband scowled at her, and she shrank away trembling. A few moments after she saw Madame Berthe catch hold of his arm with her claw-like hands and ask in a hard whisper—"but what did she say I will she do it?"

"Not to save me from prison," he answered bitterly, and her very heart ached as she heard the words.

The days passed on, and though the season had come, the gay world had not yet appeared. Everything bore a prosperous look; all the men were paid to the day; the further extravagant demands of the American lady were acceded to without a murmur; the English church was completed;—but no one as yet came to stay.

One day receiving a packet of her husband's letters from the postman, Blanche found one directed to herself. It was not a very common occurrence; her parents wrote very rarely, and her old school-friends were capricious correspondents. She turned the letter over and over again in her hands, wondering from whom it could be. Monsieur Legros caught sight of the handwriting as she did so, and started.

"Who has been writing to you, Blanche?" he said quickly.

"I do not know—I was wondering."

"Perhaps you had better give me the letter," he said quickly. Then seeing her look of astonishment, he added—"No, no; read it yourself."

She opened her letter and read; presently she looked up with a little cry.

"Camille," she said, "Jean writes to tell me that his uncle, the great *épicier* at Nantes, has died and left him a fortune of 5,000 francs a year. Ah, but that is good news!"

"Does he say any more?" asked Monsieur Legros, rather huskily.

"Yes, yes, I have not finished yet," and she

went on reading. Suddenly the colour forsook her face, leaving it ashy pale, and she looked up suddenly. "Camille, you knew this; and you have asked this poor boy for his money."

"I have advised him as to its investment, certainly."

"This must be stopped," cried Blanche. "He must not be ruined; he, an orphan!"

"You do not know what you are talking about, madame," shrieked Madame Berthe, suddenly joining in the conversation.

Blanche rose to her feet; there was a dignity in her graceful figure they had not seen before; swept her hand past showing the rows of houses: "See," she said sadly, "are they not all empty?"

"Yes, and empty they will remain as long as you conspire to ruin us," cried Madame Berthe, nodding her head up and down. Blanche turned piteously to her husband, but in his face was no sign of relenting; he looked dark and sullen.

"You will not ruin this poor little Jean?" she said.

"What do you wish?" he cried suddenly. "I have no power in the matter; I merely told him how in five years he can make 50 per cent on his money. If he choose to accept it, so be it; it is no affair of mine."

"It must be stopped."

"Who will stop it?" cried Legros, fiercely.

"I will." And poor Blanche could bear no more, but sank back in her chair white and gasping. Camille Legros was livid with rage, but he controlled himself with some difficulty, and did not speak. Madame Berthe, unhindered by her son, poured out a torrent of abuse and violent language. In vain Blanche turned her pathetic eyes from her angry mother-in-law to her husband, he offered her no protection, and after a moment or two he grew tired of the shrill voice and strode away.

Presently Madame Berthe changed her tone, and this was even more difficult to bear. "You will not ruin your husband, *ma petite bru*!" she whined. "He works so hard and hopes so much, and now all is ready, the great work is nearly accomplished, and only a little money—a very little money—wanted to keep all afloat till the tenants come; and it is a certainty—do you not see it is a certainty of success; there can be no doubt whatever about it. You whom he loves so much, and whom he took without one penny in your pocket, surely you will not turn against him!"

"But see," cried poor Blanche in despair; "why do you say all this to me? Have I not as much interest in St. Didier as yourself? Would not your ruin be my ruin also? But I must think of Jean—the poor little Jean who has neither father nor mother to care for him, and who has always been as a child to the 'Pie Blanche'."

"But when Camille himself tells you that he will guarantee him eight per cent."

"Alas! alas!" sighed Blanche.

"Then you will not hinder him!" persisted Madame Berthe.

"I must! I must!"

She broke away from her mother-in-law and went out—anywhere out of the house, she thought, as she went down the steep steps down the face of the cliff to the sea. It was a wild, gusty day; the wind nearly blew her off her feet, and sand filled her eyes and mouth.

"Life is not very happy," thought poor Blanche. She hated the sea with an unacknowledged hatred—the bustle and fuss of it—the constant changes. She was not accustomed to them, and they had no charms to the little *bourgeoise* who had hitherto spent so calm and monotonous a life.

Presently she found a sheltered spot, a sort of cave hollowed out of the rock. She was out of the wind here, and she sat down and smoothed her hair and recovered her breath. The whole conversation she had gone through was most painfully distinct upon her memory. She clasped her hands before her eyes and prayed that she might have strength to do what was right—that she might not shrink from her duty, however painful it might be to her. She must write to Jean and warn him of the difficulties St. Didier was contending with—of how likely it was that a great *faillite* was at hand. She knew that she could trust her cousin, and that he would not betray her secret to any one. Then she rose up and went home comforted.

Blanche had no wish to write secretly, or to do anything underhand, but her task was more difficult than she had anticipated. Madame Berthe set herself as a sort of spy upon all her actions; she never left her for a moment except when Legros was at home, and Blanche knew that Rosalie had orders to stop any letter she might write.

She grew pale and thin from constant anxiety, and her sleep was broken and feverish. At last she contrived to write her letter unseen, and now came the difficulty of posting it. She adopted at last the simplest mode of all. Walking home from church on her husband's arm, she quietly posted it in the letter-box.

"What letter is that?" he cried suddenly.

"My letter to Jean," almost whispered Blanche, in great terror. He almost threw her off his arm and walked off alone. Poor little Blanche stood for a moment dizzy and aghast. This seemed like an insult before the whole congregation. The peasant-women passing nudged each other, and one or two rude boys giggled and whispered.

With burning cheeks, and eyes so full of hot tears that she could hardly see her way, Blanche went slowly home.

During the next two days her husband hardly spoke to her; and she had a sense of guiltiness towards him that she could not throw off, and that was intensely painful.

About a week later Blanche received an answer from her cousin. When her husband took the letter from among his own, her heart beat so fast that she hardly knew how to bear it. He handed it to her without a word, and she could hardly summon up courage enough to open it.

Legros watched her from under his eyebrows; but he could make nothing out from her countenance, for he did not understand its varying expression. At last she started up and handed him the letter. She stood beside him with glistening eyes and clasped hands, saying eagerly, "Oh, I am so glad—so glad!"

He read it slowly: "My dear Blanche,—I am infinitely touched by the goodness of your letter to me, and of the frank warning you give me against insecure investment of my little fortune; but in this matter I must have my own way, in spite of the worldly wisdom of your advice—for which I thank you with my whole heart. Of course I realize the risk; but sometimes some thousands of francs just at the right moment will turn the scale and save the whole affair. I have an impression that this will be the case at St. Didier, and that before many years are past we shall all be millionaires. Present my compliments to your good husband, &c."

This was the letter. When he had read it, Legros put his arm round Blanche and kissed her. Madame Berthe was less forgiving.

"Ah, ah!" she muttered; "so you did not quite succeed in your little calumnies after all, *ma bru*."

Preparations for the tenants who were not forthcoming continued even more actively than before. Legros became almost reckless in the additions he made to the comfort of each house: curtains and sofas and chairs arrived from Paris; clocks and ornaments.

One morning the American lady was discovered to have gone—disappeared in the night; and nothing more was heard either of herself or her year's rent. Still Monsieur Legros was as sanguine as ever; but as the summer months wore on, his head became plentifully streaked with grey.

Monsieur Léon stayed on. How he kept body and soul together, perhaps Blanche could have told better than any one else; but his little rent was paid punctually to the day, and he threw himself headlong into the scheme. "It is always well to be first in the field in a grand new 'enterprise,'" he repeated with almost as much belief in St. Didier as ever. When all hopes of letting for the bathing season was over, Legros let freely to a strange set of people, without care or precaution, without regard to character or even appearances. The little town soon swarmed with questionable Parisians, who enjoyed themselves beyond measure, and paid only a nominal rent.

"It is intolerable," grumbled Madame Berthe. "But at all events they air the new houses."

It was a great relief to Blanche when they went away, and all the shutters were put up, and the winter drew near again.

"I wish I could help you, Camille," said she, wistfully, one day, putting her hand timidly on his arm.

"I think it must be for want of a theatre!" he cried. "I will build one."

"Oh, no, no! not yet. Have a little patience."

"You always try to restrain me," he said, rather fretfully. "Don't you see that one must do one's utmost now! and we have no middle course—we must sink or swim." And the theatre was talked of, and planned out roughly that very night.

Camille began to suffer both in body and mind from the long-continued strain of anxiety and disappointment, and the winter set in. New prospectuses were sent out, the houses were offered at the most tempting prices for the winter. The prices tempted one or two very poor families with many children; but when their term was up, the damage that had to be repaired encroached much on the small rent.

But with spring, courage came back, and even Blanche herself seemed to arouse suddenly.

"You will let me help you this year, *mon ami*," she said, eagerly.

"I do not see what you can do," was the gloomy answer.

"I will do my best," she said, gaily. "But first of all, may I take a journey all by myself?"

"By yourself?"

"Of course I shall take a *bonne* with me."

"She can have Rosalie of course," said Madame Berthe, to whom Blanche had confided her little scheme, which was a very slender one indeed; namely, to go to Tours, and dine two or three times at the *table d'hôte* among the many English—to travel perhaps a little from one town to another, and try to draw attention, already turning to the seaside, towards St. Didier. It was a chance. Blanche reckoned on her powers of description, and on the certainty that, if she could only get the people to come, they would stay. Madame Berthe reckoned on her daughter-in-law's beauty and winning manner, though she did not say so; and she also felt certain that to see St. Didier was all that was necessary.

To Legros naturally the plan appeared entirely childish and even absurd—this was not the way business should be carried on; however, he

good-naturedly yielded to their wishes, only stipulating that Madame Berthe should accompany Blanche instead of Rosalie. The poor old woman prepared with many groans; she had taken but one journey within her life, the memorable one that had brought her to St. Didier, and she felt low and unhappy at the prospect of starting afresh. However, her devotion to her son's cause would have carried her through the mysteries of *Isis* even, so she made her preparations with praiseworthy courage.

"Tell me, Camille," said Blanche, just on the eve of starting—"tell me the sort of tenants you want."

"Look!" said Monsieur Legros, pointing through the window from one house to another. "In that blue house I want a *père de famille*; he may have from four to eight children, who require education. In the pink house, *les Rosiers*, I want a lady and two daughters. That house with the arcade is a *châlet de garçon*; the smoking-room is perfect. I want educating families especially. There," he said, exultantly,—"that villa is just the one for a young ménage."

"I see," said Blanche, eagerly. "But I hope for most success among the large families."

"And those are the best of all," answered her husband. "But of all others a Scotch family is the best; for I hear that when they settle, many of their friends, uncles, cousins, and other relations come and settle round them."

Blanche and Madame Berthe went away with their minds full of large Scotch families.

IV.

Madame Berthe and Blanche arrived at Nantes, their first destination, on the 25th of May; the evening before the *Fête Dieu*. They had taken a room in one of the best hotels, and found to their great delight that it was full of foreigners, all crowded there to see the famous *Fête*.

Table d'hôte was at six o'clock. Now that the moment had come, Blanche was very much frightened, and clung to Madame Berthe's arm, who, very tremulous herself, managed to say sharp things in an under-tone, as they went in. Blanche found herself seated by a young girl, almost as shy as herself, and unmistakably English. In spite of many sharp little pinches from her mother-in-law, she could not make up her mind to begin the conversation until the soup was done; then she asked the young lady very timidly whether she liked France. The answer, in very broken French, was bright and cheery; and the blue eyes of the English girl, Meta Brownlow, looked so sweet and sunny that they soon became quite friendly, discussing different places, and making comparisons. Blanche found that her new acquaintance was anxious to understand all about the *Fête* on the morrow, so as to enjoy it thoroughly; and it ended in an engagement to meet the English family at the cathedral at high mass the following morning.

The *Fête Dieu* at Nantes is supposed to be the most beautiful in France. The English travellers were full of admiration as they emerged into the *Place* in front of the cathedral just in time to see the great procession leave the east door. The whole thing formed one of those brilliant pictures which remain in the memory for years; the streets and houses all draped with white, scarlet and blue, the draperies covered with hanging wreaths; triumphal arches overhead, from which hung baskets of lovely flowers; the whole streets strewn thickly with rushes; then the gorgeous procession itself filing solemnly out from the dark background of the dim old church; hundreds of little white and scarlet boys with stiff quaint rose-wreaths on their heads; girls in white, with long white floating veils; the gleaming of military pomp, and a fine clash of martial music as the regiment slowly passed; then women in white again, and long lines of monks with bare feet and heads and brown rough habits; then the acolytes in gorgeous dalmatics of cloth-of-gold, carrying banners, crosses, shrines—gold, crimson, purple—the brilliant colouring growing more vivid, till suddenly the bells all rolled out with a crashing sound. Like one man, every one in the vast crowd sank on their knees; twenty choir-boys in scarlet and white stood facing the great door, swinging incense in silver censers, their long chains flashing in the sun; then the chanting began, and out into the light came swaying the huge gold and silver canopy, and the Host, carried by the bishop, passed slowly amidst the prostrate crowd.

Blanche rose from her knees. "It was beautiful, was it not?" she cried, eagerly. She was almost breathless with the admiration and excitement she felt. The blue cloudless sky, the masses of roses, honeysuckle, and white pinks, the great red peonies, all added brilliance and sweet fragrance to the scene, and the thin blue clouds of incense dispersed very slowly in the clear air.

Blanche had won her way completely with the English family, who were delighted with all they saw and heard; but not till evening did she venture to broach the subject that lay so near her heart. Then when again seated at *table d'hôte* she began to talk about St. Didier. She heard, with a throb of her heart that was almost painful, that the Brownlows were thinking of spending the summer months at Dieppe. "If you would only try St. Didier," she said, wistfully. "It would be something quite new