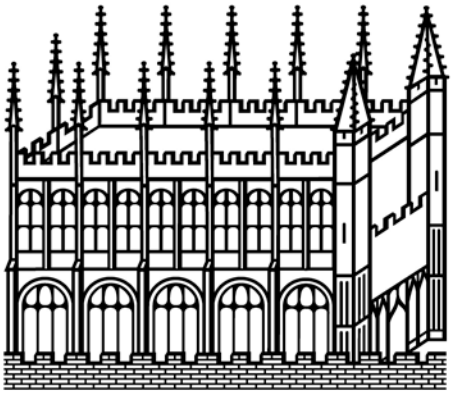

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VILLAGE CHARACTER.

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LONDON:
PRINTED BY JAS. TRUSCOTT AND SON,
Suffolk Lane, City.

Frontispiece. RINA CLIFFE. *Page* 191.

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A Village Character.

BY

E. M. L.

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF
THE COMMITTEE OF GENERAL LITERATURE AND EDUCATION,
APPOINTED BY THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING
CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.

LONDON:
SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE;
SOLD AT THE DEPOSITORIES:
17, GREAT QUEEN STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS;
4, ROYAL EXCHANGE; 48, PICCADILLY;
AND BY ALL BOOKSELLERS.

CONTENTS.

RINA CLIFFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE CLOSED CASEMENT.

"Sweet bird,
Thou comest to me when no others come;
'Tis hope that makes thee on my casement stand,
'Tis faith that bids thee fly into my hand."

"LIFT up the latch and walk in," said a gruff voice, fit to belong to Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother in disguise.

Linda Conway gave a quick, half regretful glance towards the narrow field-path over Farheath Common which led to the parish church of Hazelmere, and beyond that to the Rectory; but it was too late to act upon her inclination to return there.

"Lift up the latch, I say. I can't be waiting upon all the folks that come to my door at this time of day. Pull the string; what else is it for?"

Linda's dainty fingers tried in vain to reach the missing cord, it had slipped too far away; the latch was safely guarded. She knocked again, and this time the clattering sound of pattens, followed by the loud slam of an inner door, answered her; presently Rina Cliffe stood in the doorway, less ready with a welcome than with a torrent of words, half intended for her visitor, and as much for a wild-looking cat which had chosen that moment to spring on the oak dresser, where lay, as a tempting prize, a glistening red-finned perch fresh from the Mill Brook.

Linda Conway saw at once there was no mistake as to the mood in which she had found Rina: it was expressed in every feature and every tone of her angry voice as she exclaimed, "Do come in! Get out, you thieving, good-for-nothing thing! Oh, it's you is it, ma'am! I thought it was Master Norman come for his loaf. This cat is enough to plague the life out of me; Joan Price keeps it half-fed for nothing else but to tease me. There isn't a thing that's safe from such a thief—no, not that shelf by the ceiling. Joan has owed me for bread since harvest, and all I get from her is vexation, worry, and—wait for this—wait for that, till—— Upon my word, if

there isn't Joan's black donkey over my hedge again!"

Rina Cliffe quickly disappeared through a long row of outbuildings (half kitchen, half pig-sty, and altogether in ruin) into the garden beyond.

Linda turned nervously to the door, as if she would lift up the latch from within and make good her retreat; but upon second thoughts she determined to stay where she was, on the uneven stone floor of a very comfortless kitchen.

Rina's voice sounded angrily from the garden, "I'll have 'em up, as sure as there's a justice-court in England!" she loudly protested, as she took a final and certain aim at the offending donkey with an old twig besom.

"Which?" inquired a mischievous voice from behind a stack of wood near the hedge; "Joan, or the donkey, or the cat? I'd have 'em all up if I were you, and then you'd be sure to be right."

"I'll have you up for your impudence," screamed Rina, and a heavy stone was hurled by her powerful arm in the direction of the wood pile. "Mind what you're about, Martin Price, or you shall know more about justices and prison walls than'll please you. It won't be mighty pleasant there, I

reckon. No apple-trees to pelt, young master, no hedges to tramp down, and no mischief to be after. How will that suit you?"

A shower of dust and leaves was the answer; and then the assailant's cap was tossed in the air, and caught again. "I suppose you've been there, as you know what it's like. Did they give you some gunpowder for tea, missis?"

At this moment Linda Conway came upon the scene. "Martin," she said, "is that you?" Martin Price was in her class at the Sunday-school. He slunk down out of sight in a moment.

"There's no end to my troubles!" exclaimed Rina Cliffe as she clattered back into the kitchen. "And now, ma'am, what do you want? You've not been nigh me since you came back from foreign parts, and that's 'most a year, maybe two. Much good you'd learn there! And you may tell the rector from me, that if his dear lady had been alive she would never have consented to send you among foreigners, Cath'lics and such-like, to learn their tricks and ways."

"You are mistaken, Rina; my father placed me under the care of an old and valued friend of my mother's—a good Protestant, and, like her, a good Christian."

"Ah, well, all the better for you!" replied Rina, shortly; "but I tell you plainly you needn't come here. I want nothing from you, and nothing you'll get from me—you may as well know it first as last; I'm no hypocrite, like some folks."

"I do not want anything from you, Rina, but a civil word. I came because I heard you had been ill, and were very lonely," said poor Linda, with renewed effort to find some entrance into that unfriendly heart.

"You needn't waste any pity on me, ma'am," replied Rina; "I've done without it ever since my grandson was transported, and I'm not likely to want it now."

"Your grandson, Owen Cliffe, transported!" exclaimed Linda; "I understood he was an emigrant to Australia, and a steady, prosperous man. What had he done?"

"Done!" screamed Rina; "I'll tell you what he had done. He had been a good boy to me, and had learnt to be a good workman and a great scholar. He'd bring home the text upon a Sunday, and hit the meaning of it like the parson. Owen was very fond of his church, and I liked it well enough then."

"Why not love it still?" asked Linda. "My

father often regrets your constant absence from it. No one has taken your vacant place yet in the old pew, Rina."

"They'd better not either. I'd soon let them know a bit of my mind if they dared to take it. I haven't been into the church since my boy was transported; it would break my heart. I used to listen to his voice in the Psalms, and I never heard any one else, not even the clerk. I didn't lose a word. It seemed to me as if I was in heaven."

"I remember Owen's voice very well," said Linda; "he sang in the last Christmas anthem I heard before I left home."

"Maybe he did," said Rina, gloomily; "but he'll never sing in this church again. It's a wicked shame to have transported him, such a good boy as he was to me! 'There, granny,' says he, 'I can work for you now, and take care of the bit of land. Time was when I was no higher than this table, and you had to do it all; but I'll be a comfort to you as long as I live.'"

Rina untwisted her coarse apron from its rolled-up position round her waist, and hid her face, as she sobbed aloud in a passion of grief.

"I am very sorry, Rina," said Linda Conway, as soon as she could hear herself speak. "How did

it happen that Owen got into such trouble after all?"

"I tell you he had done nothing but be a good boy to me," said Rina, angrily. "Ask Squire Hardie, at the White House yonder—White Court they call it, it's black enough to me—ask him, I say, what he did to 'tice Owen from his home and his grandmother. He will tell you it was to make his fortune; but if he spoke the truth he might say that his brother Leonard out there wanted some trusty workmen and servants sent to him, so he 'ticed the only one I had to trust to. And Miss Hardie encouraged that girl 'Lisbeth, whom I hated, to get married to him, and they went off to foreign parts. What was it to them if Rina Cliffe was left to fret herself to her grave?"

"Owen will find he has chosen a good kind little wife," remarked Linda; "and perhaps by the time they come back to England you may have learnt to value her for his sake."

"If she 's to come back with him," said Rina, in jealous anger, "I hope he'll never see this country again. I was mad with vexation this morning when Squire Hardie said something about his coming home with his pockets lined. 'Thank you kindly,' says I, 'for transporting him; convicts

don't often come back better for their journey.' And I made my curtsey to him. He turned round and laughed at me, and rode on with his dogs, making such a splash and clatter I couldn't make him hear what else I'd got to say; but I know how to reward him. I shall——"

Linda interrupted the unpromising sentence. "Rina," she said with a smile, "do you know I really thought at first that poor Owen *was* a convict, instead of an emigrant. It was the happy side of a mistake. I am so rejoiced to think he is gone out to such a kind friend as Mr. Leonard Hardie."

"That's what you *think*, ma'am. I'll tell you what I *know*," replied Rina; "my poor boy has found it out for himself long ago, no doubt. Low wages in England are worth a mint of money earned at such a price as he earns his. A few boards nailed together for a house, and no water fit to drink within miles of country. 'Grandmother,' he says, 'I hope you'll forgive me for having got married 'gainst your will and coming to this country.' Here, you can read it for yourself." Rina turned towards the oak dresser, and opened a large Bible in what had been a green baize cover. "Let's see, I always put Owen's letters

into Obadiah, because it begins with O, and it's easy to find."

Linda took the well worn letter and began to read. "I've wished myself——"

"That's wrong," interrupted Rina, "it's 'March 4th,—Dear Grandmother, I hope this finds you in good health, as it leaves us all in this country.'"

Linda repeated the important preface, and continued—"I've wished myself back again in Old England many a time, and sometimes I feel as if I would give all my gains to be once more digging the bit of ground for you, or setting wheat in the corner piece by Mill Brook. I wonder if the old tree still hangs over the water where I found the magpie's nest and got a wet jacket for my pains? Tell me when you write if the sly bird is still alive. He'd learnt to say, 'Jacket's alive O!' and 'Come in, my beauty!' but there's no one to teach him now. I should like to see the old place again right well, but I am well paid for my work out here, and am doing a good trade in the carpentering line. I'm a fairish mason too, when no one else is to be had; we aren't particular what we put our hands to in this country. 'Lisbeth turns our dairy to good account, and any spare time she has Mrs. Leonard Hardie pays her well for. Grandmother, 'Lisbeth

is a good wife to me, and you must look it over that we got married and went off. Our boy has a fine spirit of his own already; we called him Geoffry Owen, after his grandfather and me. There was no clergyman handy, so we waited till last Christmas, when a friend of Mr. Leonard's was over, and he gave us a service, and christened Geoff and the baby together; her name is Elizabeth Verina. We send you little Geoff's likeness and a ribbon for your cap, and we both send love and duty to you, and all friends. So no more at present, from your affectionate grandson, OWEN CLIFFE.

"P.S.—Let me know if you get the money quite safe."

"Your grandson writes a nice letter, Rina, and he expresses himself very dutifully. I hope you will, as he says, 'look over it,' and give Elizabeth Cliffe a place in your heart.

"I should like to see the children well enough," said Rina, as she returned the letter to its place in Obadiah, "but I never will forgive 'Lisbeth, or speak to her, or call her my grandchild; as long as I live, she shall not darken this door. An artful, good-for-nothing chit!"

"Oh hush, Rina, do not speak so unkindly; you

might live to wish for a kind face like hers to be near you. Time constantly proves that what seemed a great misfortune, was after all the best thing that could happen to us. An emigrant has every chance of getting on where Owen is, and he may be better able to help you when you really need it."

"I don't see that," said Rina, testily; "he must have got into want and trouble, or he'd never pine to come back again as he does. He only says he's doing well to keep me from fretting worse than I do. I wonder how Squire Hardie would like to be transported, and have to build his own house and shoe his own horses, instead of riding about the country as he does, not even obliged to carry his gun himself. Times would seem hard to him, I reckon; but if I knew how, I'd help him to try it."

Linda gave a hopeless glance at the old woman's angry face. "Rina, you are making a great mistake, to say the least of it, about Mr. Hardie; he is as kind-hearted a man as ever lived—the very last person to injure you."

"O yes, of course it was no harm to send Owen into starvation!" sneered Rina. "The good Squire will support me, instead of my grandson.

He rode by the other day with a lot of rabbits hung from his saddle. 'Here, Martin Price,' says he, 'is a couple of rabbits for you, and you can take these to that cross-grained old neighbour of yours.'"

"'Thank you, Squire,' I called out from the window, 'but I shan't take any favours from you so long as my grandson is in want, and you brought him to it.'"

It was useless for Linda Conway to attempt to argue against, or even to soothe, such an angry mood: it was written in every hard line of Rina Cliffe's face; and so she left her, feeling that she had utterly failed in her mission.

The shady lane was soon crossed, and the open common lay before her; but it was not until she had turned into the quiet Hazelmere Meadows that Linda's thoughts could find relief in words, and then she almost spoke aloud, so much had Rina Cliffe disturbed her. "How wretched! what an evil temper! what an unhappy life! Oh, if I could but bring a glimpse of sunshine into that discontented face, what a blessing it would be! But how can I go there again, or at least often enough for her to get used to me? How endure her rough, rude words? I must think well about

it. To begin, and leave off tired, would never do."

As Linda looked up, quieted at length by the sweet air, and the soft golden light of the sunset before her, she saw the white sheep which had been feeding around her gathering together into the farthest corner to be numbered by the careful shepherd; she thought—and who would not also have thought?—of that other flock, the ninety and nine that were left in the wilderness, while the lost one had to be found, and brought back to its fold by the "Good Shepherd."

The contrast of her own cheerful home at the Rectory, with Rina Cliffe's comfortless cottage on the edge of the common, struck Linda very forcibly as she saw the bright firelight gleaming through the oriel window in the library, and saw her father's thoughtful face light up with sudden pleasure at the gentle touch of her fingers on the pane.

The rector had formerly been an officer in the Guards, and it was not difficult to imagine the fact, even to those who had known him only as the Rev. Francis Conway, Rector of Hazelmere. There was an unmistakable soldierly bearing that suggested it to the mind. So thought the new

rector of Hayford, who was a singular contrast both in mind and manners to Mr. Conway.

"Am I right in supposing that you were once in the army?" he inquired, in his usual prying fashion.

Mr. Conway gave one of his quiet smiles as he replied, "I am still a soldier; I have but joined another company in the great 'army of the living God.' It is hard to be a good soldier, Mr. Southern, still harder to be a good officer in such holy service."

In his daily life the rector kept up his old habits of discipline; a strict routine of duties was essential to his happiness. The early morning service never varied in its appointed hour, winter or summer. The deep-toned bell in the ivied steeple rang out its call to prayers, and at the stroke of seven the rector began the sentences.

In the same constant order followed daily study, daily exercise, either by walking to the school and the nearer houses in the village, or riding his favourite Major (a claimant for his master's old title) to the three adjoining hamlets in turn, Woodley, Farheath, and Ivy Bridge.

Nothing could be more regularly attended to than the rector's duties, and no one ever had cause

to complain of neglect; yet few of his parishioners saw him dismount (with that peculiar activity which belongs to a soldier), or watched him fasten Major's bridle to the garden gate, without feeling a sensation of dread, a quick glance of dismay, if the house was not in due order to receive him.

Truth to say, Mr. Conway's visits were so punctually timed, that the most disorderly among them had generally made some sort of preparation for his coming, and cast up a ready amount of reasons why the children had been kept from school, or they themselves compelled to be absent from church.

"Let me see," said one of these worthy villagers; "when was our rector here last? A fortnight ago?"

"No, mother, three weeks; for I met him coming across the common last Monday: he'd been to old Norman's, so we shall have him here to-day."

"Aye, that we shall. Sweep those 'tatoe peelings up, Jos, and take that wood out of the road. Stay; go along to the barn first, and tell Nancy and Susan to be off to school across the fields. It 's no use, I can't make any more excuses to the rector, and so you'd better say there 'll be

a fine fuss at the school-room to-morrow unless they go; it 's the rector's day at the 'National.' "

It was indeed a well-known and unavoidable fact, that Mr. Conway's dark eyes saw in a moment everything that a room could picture. They lit with genuine pleasure on the well-ordered home, however poor or mean; and they took equal but less friendly note of the comfortless hearth, the ill-kept children round it, and the useless trodden-down garden.

Without consulting anything but his own memory, he could point out among any number of his young parishioners the boy who neglected to learn his collect, the child who had behaved ill in church, or, worse still, the naughty one who had stayed away from the service to linger under a certain pear-tree whose boughs hung temptingly over the garden wall. That one was Martin Price, and he felt the rector's riding-whip a little sharper than even Major would have approved.

But the rector of Hazelmere is not always "on duty." We may look into the well-lighted drawing-room and see him there; the grave look has vanished, and that fine dark face of his is brightened by home comforts and pleasant associ-

ations, so that even Linda's happy smile has caught some of its sunshine.

It was one of Mr. Conway's daily "rules" so to arrange his employments as to secure an uninterrupted and sociable evening at least four days in the week with his daughter—the one treasure left in his household.

This was always a gladly welcomed time to Linda; and now the pleasant hours were over—the book replaced on its shelf which her father had been reading to her, and the work folded that had been the employment of her busy fingers. Music and song were over for that night at least; and then, the low seat being moved a little nearer to her father's great arm-chair, Linda rested her small hand on its elbow, and gravely said—

"Now, papa, before we say good-night I want your advice—real sober advice, that you must think seriously about beforehand."

"How is that to be done?" asked Mr. Conway, with a quiet smile. "If I am to advise you without knowing the subject, you must take me for a wiser man than I fear I can pretend to be."

"I don't know about that, papa, for I heard a wonderful story to-day of your powers! Jos

Anderson told me his mother had washed the children's things last Sunday morning during service, and you had given her some sharp words about it. Jos said it 'beat her' to know how you found out what she was doing, for she had taken care not to dry them on the hedge."

"Ah, poor Susan! careless enough as to her Sunday duties, but careful in the attempt to hide her Sunday working. She forgot, though, that when a room is full of steam it is likely enough to escape through a broken window-pane. I am afraid that instance of my powers will not prove them to be very remarkable."

"Well, papa, in this instance I want your wisdom to decide whether it is my duty to go and see Rina Cliffe, for the sake of trying to—to quiet her temper, or do her some good. Papa, she is very unhappy and lonely, but so wickedly cross with every one, even with our kind friend Mr. Hardie."

"What your cousin Nigel calls a 'rugged disposition'—a cliff with no verdure on it; rough granite, with here and there in its crevices a bramble or a thorn, ready to catch the poor mountain sheep who ventures to cross a slight pathway. Well, my dear, Rina Cliffe is all that you describe, and I am sorry for it, but the unhappiness and the

loneliness arise from the fact you have stated; she is so 'wickedly cross' and malicious, that no one will live with her; poor Joan Price, her next neighbour, leads a sad life with her. Even at a distance one may hear her angry attacks upon the inoffensive old creature. So you have ventured into that wretched home, and want my counsel as to future visits?"

"Yes, papa. I am not afraid of her, but she uses rough words, and that I should be obliged to hear them is the great hindrance I feel to going there again; yet if no one cares for her, what will be the consequence? She cannot read, she never goes to church, and will live only to grow worse, and more unfit to die."

Mr. Conway fidgeted in his chair, and stirred the fire, as Englishmen always do in moments of disturbed thought. Linda had touched upon one of his greatest vexations, for of all his parishioners —and they were numerous—none gave him more trouble and annoyance than did Rina Cliffe; and it was at this time understood between Major and his master, that on the day for their Farheath visitations, Rina's cottage on the Edge was to be passed at a sharp trot.

"No surrender" had always been the rector's motto, but in the single instance of Rina's tongue

he had been obliged to acknowledge himself defeated. Again and again he had endeavoured to meet the evil, yet never with the least effect. Rebuke was met with the loudest and most angry retort—advice raised a host of excuses. Quiet counsel was not even listened to; for if the rector's words were not firm enough and loud enough to warrant an attack or reply, Rina coolly disappeared from his presence, and went on with some noisy work or other in the back regions of the house. Frequently the clanking of the rusty chain over the windlass of the old well was the answer to the rector's remarks.

Thus, with a hopeless sigh at his signal failure, and the idea that his presence only called forth a worse exhibition of temper, he had for some time left Rina's house unvisited, only passing it in troubled mood, feeling she had set him entirely at defiance.

Mr. Conway might well take some time to consider before he answered Linda's repeated question, "Well, papa, what ought I to do?"

"I think I must remind you," he said at length, "of your cousin Nigel's description again; Rina's 'rugged disposition' suggests to me that a little venturesome mountain sheep would lose some of its fleecy coat in trying to find a pathway across

its dangerous surface. It seems to me, dear child, that there is something to lose on your part, little to be gained on hers."

"Papa, I have also been thinking of Nigel's words, and that sometimes a very small thing will accomplish what a greater one cannot do. For instance, the brier; you know the little robin often chooses it for his sweetest song; the thorns do not touch his tiny feet, or ruffle a feather. He can settle wherever he pleases—even upon the rough cliff itself, however dangerous it may be to the mountain sheep."

The rector smiled. "Well, then, my little bird, try your song; only do not choose the brier too often for your resting-place. I would rather see you nestled in the ivy gable of the old Rectory." He rose up to the book-case as he spoke, and then laying an open page before her, left her, with a cheerful good-night, to read it. Linda turned to the lamp, and read, with glistening eyes, her father's thoughts.

"Then daintily the Robin stayed, upon a blackthorn dark and bare:
I heeded not the leafless bough, his simple song so filled the air;
But soon again he upward flew, a little higher—a little higher—
Till on a coral branch he stood, among the berries of a brier,
And then a joyful song he gave; the wild rock echoed it along—
Down fell a golden shower of leaves, the answer to his golden song."

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST FEW CRUMBS.

"A bright-eyed Robin, golden-red, came shyly to the door,
And waited for a crumb to fall upon the shining floor;
Then in he went, and quickly flew back to the hazel-tree,
Where he might sing in sweet refrain his Benedicite."

E. M. L.

LINDA CONWAY'S next visit to Farheath was delayed by the arrival of her aunt, Mrs. Gresley, whose health required much of her time and attention; but when at length her cousin Olive joined them, and she could leave the invalid in loving care, she set off without delay to Rina Cliffe's cottage.

"Where are you going at this early hour?" inquired Olive Gresley, as she saucily peeped within the basket on Linda's arm. "A red comforter, I declare! and a small but tempting raised pie, a remedy for a cough (prescribed by my mother, no doubt), and a packet of Scripture prints. I shall not allow you to pass me until I know what you

are going to do with these. I must hear every particular."

"You will have a long story then," said Linda, as she sat down in the entrance-hall, while Olive guarded the doorway. "The Scripture prints you are curious about are intended for Bessie Vale, a poor child who has lain helplessly on her bed for months; she never was very bright, but this illness has so weakened her, in both mind and body, that she has little power to understand, and less still to express an idea. She always looked utterly stupid when I tried to teach her about Christ suffering for her, until I showed her this picture of the Crucifixion. 'Now I know,' she said. 'Look at the nails and the hammer! see that man's evil face; he dare not look at the Saviour.' Then a bright thought flashed into her mind; she knew a Christmas carol which she was quite sure was about the picture, and she could sing it all through."

"Was that the new one you sent me last year, that made such a sensation in Hazelmere?" asked Olive.

"O no; Bessie Vale could never have remembered so many lines. Her simple carol has belonged to our village for years, and it certainly has

never reached Richmond Terrace. I will try to repeat it.

'I love Jesus, because He first loved me;
In Bethlehem they found Him, and in a manger laid.
The Jews crucified Him, and nailed Him to a tree;
Joseph was a rich man and laid Him in a tomb.
Down came an angel and rolled away the stone,
Jesus rose triumphant and burst the bonds of death.
Mary sat weeping, 'They have taken away my Lord;'
Jesus said, 'Mary,' she answered, 'Raboni;'
'Go, tell John and Peter that I am risen again.'
Shout! shout the victory, the glorious work is done,
The pearly gates stand open, that all may enter in."

"The first part of each verse is repeated three times to make it fit the monotonous chant they sing to it. But you will hear it often enough on Christmas eve; I should as soon expect the bells to be silent as the Hazelmere children to fail in singing that especial carol twenty times over."

"It is a new style of poetry to me," said Olive; "but though the stanzas are so simple they sketch the 'old, old story' faithfully. Poor Bessie! so she is going to be made happy by possessing all these pictures. It is a pleasant errand, and I wish I could share it; I will send her some photographs when I get home. Linda, I never think of these things until other

people remind me. And now go on with your list, for I see you are getting impatient. Who is to be favoured with that dainty-looking pie?"

"That will, I hope, be in time for Godfrey Norman's dinner; he is an old veteran, has seen hard service in his day, and is now living in ease upon his pension. He and I are great friends, and I never take him any such dainty without being rewarded by a good story, or what I like equally well, the sight of some worthy old book from his store: he has a very old collection, and many of them are really valuable."

"Now what comes next on the list?" asked Olive. "Oh, a prescription for a cough; where shall you give that?"

"It is only a packet of lozenges," replied Linda. "I take them to our clerk's wife, Martha Lloyd; she considers her cough to be parish property, and therefore it has to be treated officially. Regular visits are expected at intervals from the churchwarden's wife and myself, when we receive details as to its length of duration, and its supposed incurability. Now, Olive, let me go, my patience is wearing out fast."

"Not until you tell me who the red comforter is for; in fact that was the only thing I really wanted

to know," said Olive, making herself into a more secure barrier across the doorway.

"I thought as much," replied Linda; "you watched its progress with such interest and wonder. Well then, Miss Curiosity, it is intended for one who never will be consoled with words; I am going to try what a little kindness will do."

"Then I know," exclaimed Olive, "and I have guessed it all along. You have been working for that odious, ill-tempered, cross-grained Rina Cliffe. My brother Nigel told me about her. She had an ill-favoured black kitten called 'Milly,' and one unlucky day Nigel's dog almost killed it; he said the old woman was furious, he thought she must be mad, and he would advise us to keep a respectful distance from her. Linda, do not think of going there."

"You need not be uneasy on my account," said Linda, as she laughingly passed on to the open porch. "You see Rina is not so hard-hearted after all; if she can love a small kitten, it is possible she may find a civil word at least for me, especially when she sees this bright-looking comforter."

The basket of treasures having been duly unpacked, to the delight of old Norman and Bessie

Vale, and the clerk's wife having graciously accepted the present of the lozenges, Linda turned towards the cottage on the Edge, and very soon, passing under the two gnarled apple-trees which guarded Rina Cliffe's garden gate, stood once more in the ivied porch, waiting permission to enter.

This time the latch had been lifted, for the door stood partly open. A glance within led her to knock gently, for behind a moreen curtain, dark with age and smoke, which screened the chimney corner, Linda saw the old woman's cat comfortably asleep before the fire, and it was well known that when "Black Milly" dared to roll herself up on a certain three-legged stool by the settle, Rina herself was at rest not far off.

The fact being this, unless Rina Cliffe had fairly tired herself out by dint of hard work and hard fare, nothing else had quiet or peace in the house. Generally, when the day's work was in progress, such a knocking and hammering was heard, such a clatter of pattens to and from the well, that truly it might be said Rina's whole life was a sharp time of cold strife; "which would wear longest, hard work or the old wife?"

It might be supposed that to sort apples and

onions on the floor, or to store potatoes in the cellar, was a quiet employment; but nothing of the kind. Rina had a habit of talking to herself about their quality and condition, grumbling loudly at the faulty roots. "There now, did I ever see the like of that? No, that I never did; ten in a score good for nothing!" If at this moment Black Milly unluckily peeped in, the worst specimen of the ten would be thrown at her with a spitefully true aim. But experience teaches wisdom, and cautious Milly had learnt to find frequent security on a sheltered bit of thatch, near the chimney, where chirping sparrows lulled her to sleep.

Guided by the same instinct, "Jacket" the mischievous avoided those unpleasant missiles, and plumed himself on the topmost bough of a St. Katherine pear-tree, calling out to passers-by, on a hot summer day, or in the soft falling southern shower, "What a frost it is!"

But it is too bad to leave Linda Conway standing at the door so long, while I meant only to explain the reason she knew Rina Cliffe to be at home, whenever she might choose to reveal her presence from behind the old moreen curtain.

Perhaps Rina was enjoying her snooze in the

Page 33.

same manner and as soundly as Black Milly; at all events the knock had to be repeated before an ungraciously uttered "Come in" admitted her visitor. More hospitable than his mistress, Jacket slyly turned his head very much on one side, and called out, in high glee, from his perch on the settle, "Come in, my beauty! Jacket's alive O!"

"Well, ma'am," said Rina, with a look of defiance on her face, "what do you want this time? I see you've got a basket; is it apples?—they're four a penny."

"No, thank you," Linda replied, with a smile at the strangely rude greeting, and at Jacket's civil tone, as he echoed, "Four a pen-ny! What a frost it is! Jacket's alive O!" "I called to see how you were getting on, Rina; and as the last time I met you one of your great complaints was the loss of a red comforter your grandson had given you, I have been making one for you, very soft and warm. You see I am old-fashioned enough to know how to knit. I hope it will be a comfort to you."

Rina took the offered gift, with a strange expression on her deep-lined face. It seemed to Linda that she was glad of it, and even grateful, but

so habitually surly that she did not know how to arrange her ideas on the subject.

"Well," she said at length, "it's a mighty good one, and I may as well have it;" and then her rough unsteady fingers began to roll it up slowly. Evidently she was debating what else she could bring herself to say. Before she had tucked in the last bit of fringe a tear fell upon it, which Rina immediately concealed by putting on a pair of round-eyed spectacles that lay on the table. Armed with these, she looked up boldly, and in a loud, sudden voice, added: "I'm very much obliged to you."

The effort to accept the gift having been made, Rina got up, and opening a drawer in the oak dresser, placed it carefully among some choice apples and her best cap.

"May I sit down, Rina, for a few minutes?" asked Linda. "I am rather tired with my walk."

"You can please yourself, ma'am," replied Rina. "Get off that stool, you lazy thing!" she said, sweeping off the black cat with a good stroke of her rough apron. "Hie off, you noisy Jacket! go along out of the house, both one and other. There's no peace for any one when you're here to prate!"

"Do not disturb them on my account," said Linda; "I admire them very much. How long have you had them?"

Unlucky question!

"Jacket was my poor grandson's. Owen brought him home from his nest in the old ash-tree by Mill Brook two years before Squire Hardie transported him. Yes, he belonged to my poor boy, who 's no better than a convict," said Rina, with a darkening frown. "And the cat was a little mewing kitten that he picked up out of the mill pond, and brought home in his pocket. 'Grandmother,' he says in one of his letters, 'be good to Black Milly for my sake, and don't take on so because I have left. I shall come back some of these days with enough to keep us all, and no need for you to slave over that rough corner piece by the brook.' Ah," groaned Rina, hiding her face in her thick hurden apron, "I shall never see Owen Cliffe again—never! I was seventy-eight last March, and by the time he has made a fortune I shall have left off work. He 's more like to find me where his grandfather lies than here. But," she added, changing tears for a wicked exclamation, "if he were to come back to-morrow, and brought that 'Lisbeth with him here, I 'd not speak to him. I always

said it, and I mean it. 'Lisbeth shall never darken my doors."

Linda sighed at hearing again the old, sad, anger against Owen's wife. Would she never see Rina Cliffe without being pained by its obstinate repetition? To-day, at all events, she could not endure to listen longer; and so, without attempting to outstay the storm, she ended one of many equally disappointing visits to the cottage.

Olive Gresley met her in the large meadowlands, where a long still shade rested peacefully from the leafless elms in the misty hedgerows.

"You do not know how relieved I am to find you have got away safely from Farheath Edge," was Olive's first greeting. "Rina Cliffe's very name is suggestive of danger. Did she shut the door in your face when you made your charitable venture, or was she condescending enough to accept the gift? Tell me all about it."

"I would much rather speak of my other visits just now, Olive, these green fields look so pleasant, and the air is so refreshing; in truth, I want to forget Rina Cliffe for a while."

"Of course you do. Now take my advice, good cousin, and never go near that ill-omened creature again. I dislike the sight of her as much as a sea

captain does the stormy albatross. Your old nurse, Joyce Archer, tells me her evil wishes are dreadful for poor 'Lisbeth, and she is much afraid you will not escape her tongue."

"'The curse causeless shall not come,' you know," replied Linda; "she cannot hurt me, and I may possibly do her some good. I had a very different and much pleasanter visit to the child Bessie Vale. She had made a great discovery in her pictures, which took her a long time to explain, and she so interested me that I forgot the hour; consequently, when I reached old Norman's cottage, his noontide dinner was over, and the green baize cloth laid on the table instead. Every preparation was made for a 'good read,' even the spectacles had been duly polished and tied on; so you may suppose I was late in my good intentions with regard to his dinner."

"I suppose, however, you were fully prepared to be a good listener," remarked Olive. "I hope you had the enjoyment of a comfortable arm-chair?"

"Not only that," replied Linda, "but a luxurious cushion and footstool, kept entirely for his guests. Olive, you should see that wonderful piece of work —he made it himself, of alternate squares of scarlet and black cloth; he calls it 'Peace and War,'

because it is a relic of his regimental dress and a coat of the old rector's. After I was duly installed there, Godfrey stirred up the wood fire till the dark chimney was all aglow, and then we began our talk. You see I like best to think about the polite society I have been in, rather than Rina Cliffe's manner."

"I wonder what you could find to say to the old man," said Olive; "I should be fairly puzzled in such a case. After I had remarked upon the state of the weather, and the good pattern of that cushion, I should be hopelessly at a loss for a subject."

"Nothing of the kind," replied Linda; "you would feel, as I did, that it was a pleasure to be a listener. There is such simplicity and truthfulness in everything he says; no matter how often you have heard the story, or how long ago, it does not vary a shade in its repetition. I often think memory rewards a true care of its treasures, by improving the powers, and giving you a beautiful store of ideas and thoughts. A careless tongue certainly makes a careless memory."

"I never thought of that," said Olive, rather gravely; "but of course memory is a talent to be cultivated and improved. Linda, you are becoming

a good mentor; I shall tell my most practical brother Nigel, when I write to him, that I have left the great city of London to learn wisdom in an obscure village."

Linda smiled. "Not much of that will be my teaching, Olive; I am always in need of the lesson myself. You do not know how hard I find it to teach even a child like Bessie Vale. Those pictures were a perfect boon to me. I told Godfrey Norman about her, and the intense interest she at last took in the story of the Crucifixion. 'Poor child!' he said, 'weak and feeble in mind and body, yet you are stronger in faith now than Godfrey Norman was (with all his health and energy and freedom of will) for many a year of his life.' It was a great mercy that his careless heart was ever touched. 'See here, Miss Linda, I can show you the picture that first led me to the Cross of Christ;' he took up a little book from his treasured store, and gave it me. It was in the most perfect preservation, although it was printed in the year 1594! Each narrow leaf was embellished, and the old English letter clear and distinct. I read its title, 'The Psalmes or Prayers taken out of the Holy Scripture, commonly called the King's Psalmes.' 'It is in faultless

condition, Norman,' I said: 'I never saw a more beautiful old book.' 'Yes, you are right,' he said, 'but that is all outside show; look within, Miss Linda, look within.'"

"Was it a picture of the Crucifixion, Linda?" asked Olive.

"It was a word-picture," replied Linda; "we can look at it as we cross this last quiet meadow, for I copied a few sentences just to give you an idea of it—

"'Behold that pure and spotless Lamb, which taketh away the sinnes of the world; by whose precious blood we were redeemed from our iniquities. Looke upon that most meeke Innocent, which like a lambe was ledde to His death.

"'Behold (O loving Father) the blessed head of Thy dear Sonne, crowned with sharp thornes. Behold Thine own sweet Sonne, how all His bodie was drawen, and stretched foorth on the Crosse. His godly eyes dasell, and loose their sight. His princely face is wan and pale.

"'Looke upon the pain of Him who is both God and man; and release the misery of man whom Thou hast made.

"'O righteous Father, looke not straightly upon the multitude of my sinnes; but looke on the face of Jesu Thy Holy Sonne, which being without sinne, bare our sinnes in His bodie on the trœ of the Crosse.

"'Be my helper, and forsake me not, for Thy goodness grant me that at the leastwise now I may beginne to live well.—Amen.'"

"Thank you for the extract," said Olive, quietly; "and now give it me to keep; you will often see Godfrey Norman, and I live among another people,

less truthful, less earnest, and more, far more unbelieving."

Linda tore a small leaf from her note-book, and gave it to her cousin. "It is better to possess the simple belief of Bessie Vale, and share old Godfrey's bright hopes, than all the ability and learning that can be collected, if only used to weaken our faith. A worthless theory, however ingenious, is but a poor exchange to offer for the perfect trust and happiness I have seen to-day. Indeed, Olive, those who speak slightingly of the Holy Christ should first answer this question, so that a child might understand it: 'To whom else shall we go?'"

"It seems strange, Linda, that any should tamper with the 'sure and certain hope' few can have failed to witness; even I, who have seen death so seldom, cannot but recall with thankfulness the peaceful expression of my dear father as he said, 'I believe in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.' They were his last words to us; and who would not have said Amen to such a glorious creed? It is so simple, so grand, why should any one cavil at it?"

"My father says it is because intellectual pride constantly tries to assert itself, and seeks to discover those mysteries which we are told we shall only be able to understand hereafter, and that it is the 'bitter fruit of the tree of knowledge,' which even now the evil one tempts us to taste. He says. 'When doubts arise, take instant refuge at the foot of the Cross, and, holding fast the hope given by it, wait—wait until the angel Faith, who ever guards that holy place, shall hasten to your aid, and, filling your heart with a more childlike belief in things not seen, shall lead you on your way rejoicing.'"

"I wish I could remember your father's remarks as easily as you do," said Olive; "he interests me so much, especially in his favourite theme, the Scriptures. It is pleasant to hear him say that the more he studies and the more closely he looks into minute passages the greater impress of truth he finds everywhere throughout. We have been having quite a grave conversation, Linda; I think it began with old Norman's book of Psalms. By-the-bye, you must not fail to introduce me to it and its owner."

"Certainly not," replied Linda; "and I scarcely know which will please you most, his picturesque

'cabin' or himself. As to his precious book-store, if I could covet anything that makes him happy it would be the one we have just been talking about. The latter part I had hardly time to look over; it is called 'The Queenes Prayers or meditations, wherein the minde is stirred to several afflictions heere, to set at naught the vaine prosperitie of this world, and always to pray for the everlasting felicitie.'"

"We will go and make another extract some day," said Olive, "and send it to Nigel as a specimen of your favourite style of composition. It would be rather too wordy for his taste, I think, judging by his fancy for the 'downright' and practical writing of St. James. You should hear him speak of that sometimes, Linda; he will repeat the story of the gold ring and goodly apparel, and ask if I have not seen the very same scene acted at St. Miniver's! I deny it of course, and he then inquires my opinion of the description St. James gives in few words of pure religion; I remain silent, and he remarks gravely, 'It is rather a contrast, is it not, to the high-flown Christian sentiment we have just been favoured with from Miss De l'Or Montague and her friend, with regard to that forty-minute discourse last Sunday morning. Such

professions are made doubtful to my mind if they are followed by a discussion on the hints and inferences that have been collected against their next-door neighbour. St. James took a rather startling view of such Christians when he said, 'Purify your hearts, ye double minded.'"

"There is a singular sincerity about St. James' writings," remarked Linda, "and I can quite fancy my cousin Nigel appreciating them."

"So can I," replied Olive, "but it is seldom my reserved brother gives one the chance to guess his opinions, much less his thoughts. I suppose he is still on the wide seas, Linda; I wish we could hear of his safe arrival at Cuba. I feel almost superstitious about Rina Cliffe's ill-will towards him, for I hear that she cannot forgive the injury Black Milly's leg sustained from his pointer, and wishes he may have a disastrous voyage. How I dread the very sight of that old woman."

"Silly child, she has no power to harm him," said Linda; "but it would indeed be welcome news to hear of his safety: as it is, we can only assure ourselves of our own arrival at the Rectory. Here is the squirrel in the arbutus-tree; look at his bright eyes, Olive! He is in the beech-tree now, on the low bough where we feed him. Ah,

you are a stranger, and too stylish for his shy taste; he is off again. Follow me to the terrace walk—I know all his haunts."

"Quite willingly," replied Olive; "but you must first answer my question, now that we are out of the meadows; tell me, was Rina Cliffe dangerous?"

Linda's happy face looked up gravely in a moment. "Dear Olive," she said, "why do you ask? She was only like—herself, and——"

"The Robin's song did not charm the listener," said Mr. Conway, as he quietly joined them and finished Linda's sentence. "Never mind, dear child, patience is always needed; I watched the sun rise this morning, and it was simply a gradual dawn of grey cloud and misty light—I had given up all idea of sunshine,

"'Till eastward in the heav'n I saw at last the sign,
O'er the far purple mountain a single silver line;
It broadened and it deepened to a sea of red and gold,
With clouds of rosy amber among its glory rolled.'"

CHAPTER III.

ROBIN'S FEATHERS ARE RUFFLED.

"She has not learnt another lay;
Her old song still delights her."

"Now, mamma," said Olive Gresley, as she stood by the bright fire in the little sitting-room up-stairs, "give me the space on the sofa that your work occupies; I can then look at you, and at the same time give you the day's history. I dare not take the low folding-chair opposite, because Linda always appropriates it, and I should expect her to be as much offended with me as Rina Cliffe's dignified black cat would be if I had selected her three-legged stool."

"A clever excuse," remarked Linda, "for your choice of a place in that snug corner by Aunt Margaret."

"Well, dear children," said Mrs. Gresley, with a happy smile, "I am well content to have you both near me under any pretext; nevertheless the solitary part of this day has been more enjoyable than

usual, for I have had a pleasant companion in my book; and Dr. Percy, who has been here, prescribed something which accords greatly with my inclination—namely, a longer sojourn in the fresh country air, so that if my brother and Linda will consent to the arrangement we may spend Christmas-tide together."

"There is no hesitation on that point," replied Linda, warmly, "so that is soon settled. My cousin Olive seems to be enduring the November fogs bravely, without even the enlivenment of a concert, or any outside gaiety to relieve the gloom; I hope, therefore, she may enjoy December, and perhaps find Christmas-time in the country 'a right goodsome season,' as old Godfrey Norman calls it."

"So far from being dull," replied Olive, "I am kept constantly on the *qui vive;* for indeed, mamma, society in the West End knows nothing in comparison with the insight we possess into each others occupations and affairs in the small world of Hazelmere. Only imagine the interest it excites when Linda and I reach the cross-roads in our pony carriage, and Miss Tryphosa Mills, from her muslin-screened window opposite, can decide the point of our destination. Her pleasure

is enviable as she turns to her small servant and makes this valuable announcement—'Miss Linda Conway has just driven by; I dare say she is gone to call at White Court,—leastwise she turned to the right after she passed the finger-post. The grey pony was very spirited, and the carriage has been varnished, or something. It seemed to me she had a new feather in her hat.'"

"What an inventive genius you have," remarked Mrs. Gresley, with an amused smile at Olive's description of country life.

"Not in the least, I assure you," replied Olive, demurely. "We called upon Miss Mills on our return home, and she repeated, word for word, what she had told the little servant; adding, 'But I could not make a guess at you, Miss Gresley.' In truth, mamma, you can have no idea of what consequence the smallest action is in this village-world. Linda says the amount of foolish gossip in quiet Hazelmere would astonish me; and as to fault-finding, the people seem like a flock of sheep when there is a gap in the hedge—one acts as leader, and then all follow one another over it; if there is none, they make it, for want of better occupation, I suppose."

"Ah yes," said Linda, "it is so sometimes,

and that is the unfavourable view of life in the country. I have felt the power of idle words to fret and annoy even here; but that is only now and then, when, as Olive says, 'a gap in the hedge sets the sheep wandering.' Generally I have a happy feeling that we are all one flock, under one shepherd, and I love my pasture."

"You are right, dear child," said Mrs. Gresley, "for in spite of these small vexations there is a great feeling of clanship in a village. You have noticed, I daresay, when there is any sign of approaching danger to a flock, how they all herd closely in defence."

Linda smiled. "Yes, the good people here remind me of that fact; they will often attack each other rather unmercifully, but if any stranger dare to use the same words, or condemn a failing in the same terms, they will indignantly and unitedly defend 'our village.'"

"Mamma," said Olive, as she stirred the fire and sent its brightening influence through the room, "while you and Linda have been talking in sober prose, I have chosen some lines of Cowper's to suit the subject. Listen!

"'Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat,
To peep at such a world. To see the stir
Of the Great Babel, and not feel the crowd.'

I mentally reversed the poet's fancy, for, as regards freedom from observation, London might be called 'the retreat,' and our village the 'Great Babel.'"

"At all events this bright little room is a peaceful retreat to an invalid," replied Mrs. Gresley, "and when the evening brings us together here we certainly feel it to be pleasant; we may safely make our observations from such a quiet 'loophole,' and learn wisdom if we will. And now tell me this day's history. I have scarcely seen Linda since morning, or you either since your drive to White Court."

"That drive," said Olive, "was the most difficult undertaking I ever attempted; more than once I gave it up as hopeless. When I came down to breakfast this morning I found Linda and Joyce Archer just come back from the early service. The rector had been sent for to see Bessie Vale, who they said could not live through the day. We planned our expedition, and intended to set off directly after Linda had gone through her usual conference with Mrs. Archer respecting dinner, but for two hours I sat in the dining-room with hat and gloves on in despair. I came to this conclusion, mamma, that if my morning's experience was a true specimen of life in a country rectory, I would never covet the same."

"Why so?" asked Mrs. Gresley. "It was not long since I heard you regretting that your brother Nigel had not taken Holy Orders instead of his chosen profession. There was nothing so delightful, you thought, as a clergyman's life, especially in the country."

"Perhaps I may have fancied it," replied Olive, "but it was when I knew less about it; to-day I have decidedly changed my opinion. It would be impossible for me to undertake the charge of so many visitors and their various requirements: ten, at least, before Linda and I could set off for our appointed drive. Half-a-dozen messages to be answered; books to be exchanged; school work to be fixed; clothing and medical cards to be filled up; beef-tea to be sent here, rice and milk to be sent there, and a hundred fidgety things to attend to in an orderly fashion. Clerical life seems pleasant enough until you are initiated into the daily routine of its duties—*i.e.*, trials of patience in endless variety."

"Very well," said Mrs. Gresley, with a smile, "you have made an experienced observation from our loophole. Learn wisdom, and ward off the evil; you know, at all events, what station of life to avoid. What does Linda say about her duties as the rector's daughter?"

"She says, Aunt Margaret, that she finds the pleasure which always is to be found in the employments to which we are called. She does not say she would have chosen them, because there are great responsibilities belonging thereto; but she dare not say she would wish to change her position and appointed work."

"We never can tell," said Olive, demurely, "what would really suit us best; but I think Linda's fate is certain. A country parsonage, with a paradise of a garden sloping down to a soft and silken river, the peace of her home only disturbed by the endless, endless work without. I can fancy her in the height of enjoyment, tying up a variety of choice carnations, while her clerical-looking husband is cutting some upright hazel sticks, to suit her fastidious idea of height and thickness. They are just having a merry laugh together over their work, when a message from the house—the destroying angel to their peace—interrupts them. 'If you please, sir, there is a child wants to be baptized that is very ill. And if you could spare an hour this afternoon the churchwarden would be glad to meet you at the church concerning the new spouting; the rain has damaged one of the walls, I was to say.'"

Linda's face certainly did not brighten up at the picture. Truth to say, she had never sketched such a one for herself in those moments when fancy takes a flight above the clouds to look beyond the present ordinary view of life. Presently, however, she had a merry smile for Olive.

"Who knows," she said, "whether the future has not a change of employments in store for me? I can tie up carnations in a rectory garden now, and it is nothing new to be called off from such a recreation to the duties which you say are simply trials of patience. I am content to leave my destiny in other hands than yours, Miss Olive. 'Let to-morrow take care of to-morrow' was my last new song, and I like the sentiment."

"You will wisely leave the future to itself," said Mrs. Gresley, "knowing Who directs the smallest event in our lives. Now mind your duty in the present to myself, if you please, and tell me the history of to-day. To begin, how did you find Mrs. Hardie?"

"Mamma, we found her in great distress of mind; she has lost her dog Flossy. She had been sitting up two nights with him, and really looked quite ill with the anxiety and fatigue. The Squire laughed good-humouredly enough over the story of her grief,

and said, 'My dear, you had better keep this a secret, or Rina Cliffe will say it is another judgment upon us for the transportation of her grandson. You know, Miss Gresley,' he said,' that the youngster took it into his head to emigrate—there was too much work for him, he thought, on White Court farm, and not enough pay; and as some of his companions were going out to make their fortunes, he set his mind on trying the same chance. Owen had always been steady in my service, and was recommendable, so I did what I could to help him; first I wrote to Liverpool for information, and then gave him a trifle for the journey and a letter to my brother Leonard in Melbourne. Now, would you believe it, the ungrateful old——'

"'Hush!' interrupted Mrs. Hardie; 'I know what you are going to say, and I do not like to hear you call poor old Rina such hard names.'

"'Well then,' said the Squire, with a comical look at his wife, 'my respectful and valued tenant Verina Cliffe, in return for my trouble in writing (which I assure you I thought more of than the expense in forwarding her grandson's plans), accuses me of having made a convict of him.'

"Mrs. Hardie said that an especial grievance

was added to this accusation. Owen engaged himself to Elizabeth Somers, who was in her service; and as the girl was inclined to emigrate with him, Rina declared it to be a deep-laid scheme to supply Mr. Leonard Hardie with two valuable servants, and to deprive her of her only stay and comfort. She would hear no reason. The Squire, and the Squire only, was to blame. Her anger was frightful; and as Owen was determined to go, Mrs. Hardie said she was thankful when they were both safe out of the country.

"Now, mamma, this Rina Cliffe is the very individual who possesses the superb red comforter Linda was so busily finishing the other day, and whom she so often goes and visits. I think she ought to be forbidden to go near Farheath Common, or rather the cottage on the Edge. Pardon me, Linda, but I cannot help remarking that the edge of a cliff is dangerous."

"You have been listening to Joyce Archer's tale about Rina," replied Linda. "I assure you she can be as genial as Mrs. Archer herself; besides, I did not take you with me into her hazardous company."

"No, indeed," said Olive, quickly, "I would not have passed under that crab-tree archway for the

world. Mamma, Rina's castle is guarded by two distorted-looking russet apple-trees. A heavy fog dripped from their knotted boughs on to the paved walk below; and as I waited there for Linda, at a safe distance from the gate, the most unearthly voice repeated in weird tones, from the topmost branch, 'What a frost it is!' It was a wicked-looking magpie. I said to it, 'What on earth do you belong to?' the creature gave a long shrill whistle, and then, with an impudent flap of its wings, looked down upon me and answered, 'Jacket's alive O! Come in, my beauty.'"

"I believe," remarked Linda, "that Olive was as much disturbed by my clever friend Jacket as by Rina Cliffe herself, although she was in a most amiable mood, and politely laid her apron over the wheel to guard my dress. By-the-bye, Grey Donald seemed hardly inclined to allow the attention, and after we had left the common he had the dishonest purpose of passing Hayford turnpike. He did succeed in depriving us of our change from the lady of the gate, to say nothing of our loss in her curtsey and usual 'I thank you, ladies!' but we had a most inspiriting drive in consequence."

"It was well that we had," remarked Olive, "otherwise Mrs. Southern, the vicar of Hayford's excellent wife, would have depressed my usual flow of spirits into a woefully narrow space. Her first greeting was this,—that we had come on the wrong day, and at a very unfortunate moment. We of course proposed to make our call at another time, and rose to leave; but no, after making us effectually uncomfortable, Mrs. Southern declared that she had long desired to have a little conversation with her young friend Miss Conway, and it might be some time before she again found an opportunity to say a few words, as she was making arrangements to leave home with her daughter Caroline.

"Mrs. Southern glanced as she spoke towards the bay window which overlooked the garden, and at once the 'unfortunate moment' was explained to me, for I recognised the light hair and light figure of the Rev. Edwin Mitts, wherever the dwarfed lilac-trees in the shrubbery permitted it to be seen, while a long blue gauze streamer floating high above the late curate's hat suggested to my mind the fact that Miss Carrie Southern was his companion in the promenade. You see, mamma, I am already learning Hazelmere ways, and taking

an interest in my neighbours' affairs, otherwise I should have failed to ascertain, as I did from Miss Tryphosa Mills, that Mrs. Southern and her daughter were on the eve of a visit to some friends who claim Mr. Mitts as their pastor, a visit which Miss Tryphosa hinted was likely to be an eventful one."

Mrs. Gresley remarked, with a quiet smile, that Olive had mistaken the nature of the observations they had agreed to make from their "retreat," namely, to guard against the faults and failings of others, certainly not to learn so readily the Hazelmere taste for gossip. "Linda," she said, "I hope you can give me a more sensible account of your day's history than this silly child appears able to do."

"Mamma, you asked me to give it you, so I claim my right. Linda, you are not to speak! You will make the southern breeze appear softer than it really was, and I assure you, my dear mother, there was a decided touch of east about it, cold and penetrating.

"'I have been thinking, my dear,' said Mrs. Southern with a sweet smile, yet with an expression of voice and eye suggestive of lemon-juice, 'I have been thinking, that now you are thoroughly settled at home with nothing in the world to do, it would

be well to give you a little advice. Believe me, your pleasures would not be lessened if you took an interest in your father's parish.'

"I opened my eyes rather wider than usual as Mrs. Southern continued these valuable remarks: 'Of course it is very delightful to drive about the country in a stylish little pony carriage of your own, and to spend your time in painting and illuminating texts, perhaps reading a novel, or learning a new song; but, my dear Miss Conway, there is a much more important work before you: if you would, for instance, read to the old and infirm in your distant hamlets. I understand from Miss Percy that there is one of the Farheath parishioners who never enters the church, and is perfectly heathenish in her conduct; I think her name is Cliffe. Now there is an opportunity for you. I have had a wide experience in visiting such cases, and I should advise you to make her house the centre of your efforts. Call together her neighbours—ten, or twice ten if there are as many—to meet you there. Read, explain, instruct them. You speak to them all, but the one hears you who in all probability would not listen to you if you spoke to her particularly.'

"I looked across at Linda; she was intently trac-

ing out the pattern of a Turkish carpet with her umbrella. Mrs. Southern evidently thought her words had made an impression, for she added, with a patronising smile, 'You are young you know, Miss Conway, and we cannot expect great things from you at once, but if you make a beginning much will result from it. Suppose now you take a class of young women, gather them round you in your dining-room, read to them, let them read to you in turn, and explain as you go on; you would find it to be a door for good. I have done so myself, and intend, when time permits, to publish a little account of the success I have met with in the work.'"

"She will make a mistake, I think, if she ever fulfils that purpose," remarked Mrs. Gresley. "There seems to be a strange fashion prevailing amongst the energetic Christian ladies of our day to publish their good deeds, no doubt intending it as an encouragement to others to follow their example; but I do not think it wise."

"I have neither ability nor nerve to undertake a public reading," replied Linda. "Besides, dear aunt, there is such a sweet idea conveyed to my mind in the words, 'their works do follow them;' and I seem to understand it better, when I hear

from time to time some fresh tribute of love to my mother's memory, than if she had written a book and left us to read an account of all her good works here in Hazelmere."

"Linda can express her opinions to you, mamma," said Olive, "but I assure you she was utterly silenced, and would have failed to make any reply to Mrs. Southern if I had not felt indignant at the interference, and roused myself to a little mischievous reply. 'No doubt,' I remarked, with a significant glance towards the shrubbery, 'your experience has been useful to your daughter. I suppose Miss Caroline is able to conduct such classes? and if she has not the timidity of my cousin Linda, she must be a valuable assistant to you.'

"'My daughter Carrie is—a—is at present unequal to the exertion. She is frequently from home; and indeed her father is so active himself in the parish, with his different classes and lectures, that her help is scarcely required. We have the privilege of a special service fortnightly in our school-room, so that Hayford cannot be called a *neglected* parish, and it is especially in such a case that I would recommend young ladies to undertake the work.'

"This was too much for Linda's patience. She had borne the allusion to her own duties quietly enough, but you should have seen the flash of her eyes at this slap at her father.

"'You have not long been a resident in our neighbourhood, Mrs. Southern,' replied Linda, 'and you have been no doubt too much engrossed with your own parish and its affairs to form any correct notion about those of Hazelmere, otherwise you would have known that my father has had daily service in his church for many years, and that few villages have been more faithfully cared for.'

"Mrs. Southern gave several nods, and smiled withal, but it was evident her opinion was unaltered. 'My dear,' she said, 'there may or may not be good derived from a daily service, but you know your father is growing old in his Master's employ, and the mind requires often *stirring up*. A stranger coming into the parish excites interest; there is a novelty, a freshness which is agreeable, and I assure you (much as I appreciate Mr. Southern's talent for preaching), I look forward to the "special" service with extreme pleasure. The Dissenters always attend, and in fact it is to meet their wishes that we have the service

in the school-room instead of the parish church. Now, Miss Conway, I very much doubt whether your father ever could secure the attendance of a Dissenter in his daily service.'

"'Certainly not,' replied Linda; 'for this very good reason, that he has none among his parishioners; we are very united in Hazelmere.'

"'Do you find any good practical results from the special services?' I asked, with the gravity of a quakeress. 'I mean, do your people attend to their regular duties better? are the Dissenters who meet you in your school-room induced to join in your Sunday services?'

"'Well—a—no, I cannot as yet say they have done so; but they do consider the "special" in our school-room both profitable and valuable.'

"'But,' said Linda, 'if the object of these services is to rouse your people to their duties, and to stir them up to value more highly their appointed clergyman and their church, surely it is a mistake not to worship where they are desired by him to attend. The "special" services will now never be connected with the parish church.'

"'I see that you are imbued with certain prejudices, which prevent you from taking an

enlarged and liberal view of Christian privileges,' replied Mrs. Southern. 'I suppose the subject of the "mission" is one that your father has not even considered; he forms his opinions quite apart from the thinking men of the neighbourhood. Mr. Southern and he rarely agree.'

"'On the contrary, my father has thought over and discussed it very seriously. He did so when Mr. Southern proposed to unite Hazelmere with Hayford in the circuit; but there are such various shades of opinion, even among your special preachers, that a cautious man like my father would naturally hesitate to commit the teaching of his people fortnightly to an utter stranger; he therefore felt it wiser to continue during the special season of Lent the plan he has found useful for more than thirty years.'

"'I was not aware,' remarked Mrs. Southern, with a touch of cold east chilling her tone, 'that your father had adopted any means for varying his preachers; I think, if I am not mistaken, that he has never applied to Mr. Southern for assistance on such occasions.'

"'Perhaps not,' replied Linda, quietly; 'he has hitherto secured for the Lent lectures the services of his more distant clerical friends. He appoints

the subject of each, so that a connected instruction may be given his people—something that their minds may dwell upon, something to build them up in the faith, and enable them to "walk more warily in these dangerous days," as the Commination Service expresses it.'

"I think Mrs. Southern had caught a glimpse of the two interesting individuals in the shrubbery on their way to the house; for she replied, 'If I had time, Miss Conway, I should much like to enter a little deeper into the subject, but as my daughter and I leave by an early train to-morrow, my engagements are pressing, and——"

"'We will at once say good morning,' replied Linda; and I added, in my new character of the serious, 'When we renew the subject, Mrs. Southern, I shall be one of your first converts if you can prove that Hayford is benefited by the special services. My home is in London, and I should suggest a wider door of usefulness there, than in a country town already well supplied with privileges.'

"I spoke in Mrs. Southern's own phraseology; but she had no time to reply, for she heard another door open from the garden, and she politely hurried us off through the French window in the drawing-room, in order, as she said, to gratify

Linda's love for flowers by the sight of some choice chrysanthemums, which naturally led us to the pony carriage in waiting, and to the welcome farewell."

"'Let us go back over the common,' said Linda, 'instead of taking the straight road home. The fresh south-wester will meet us bravely, and I feel half-stifled with the atmosphere of Mrs. Southern's drawing-room and our conversation. We can stay to some purpose in a more refreshing neighbourhood, for I want to introduce you to old Godfrey Norman; you will hear something worth listening to from him.'

"So Donald's rather obstinate head was turned, and we soon found ourselves in the wide chimney-corner, where Master Norman himself gave us a cordial reception. He seemed a little put out at first because the guests' arm-chair, with its renowned cushion, could not be offered to both of us. The question was, which?

"Linda settled it by telling him Miss Gresley was the greater stranger.

"'Ah, well, so she is,' he said; 'but her name is not strange to me;' and he took off his blue cap as he added, 'Gresley is a name I shall always honour. I knew a fine young officer once, Captain

Gresley he was then, but he lived to win higher titles for himself before he died. Ay, and the best of titles was his too, for he was a godly, good man, and a true soldier of the Cross; I always say our rector is more like him than any one I ever saw. When he first spoke to me we were cruising among the Grecian islands: fair as Paradise I thought them, covered with groves of sweet-smelling orange-trees, and with beautiful cliffs sheer down to the blue sea. Our rigging —for the sea was deep to the very shore—entangled itself among boughs of green myrtle and olive; and as we sailed up the little creeks and inlets to take in a supply of water and gather fresh fruits and vegetables we fancied ourselves in another world. I remember Captain Gresley standing on deck with me as we passed under one of these fairy islands. "I see you have an eye for what is beautiful, Godfrey," he said. "The Almighty Creator might well look upon His work and pronounce it to be 'very good;' but remember that storms can break upon such a fair shore as this, and we must look for a better haven and a more enduring inheritance.'"

"Old Norman often speaks of the stormy life he has passed through," remarked Linda, "but

he never dwells on the trials of the past; his favourite theme is the rest he has found, and it is his quiet enjoyment and appreciation of every comforting thought which makes his example so cheering. I had felt ruffled by Mrs. Southern's manner and remarks, but I recovered myself directly we were under the brightening influence of old Godfrey's 'cabin.' I asked him to let Olive see the 'Queenes Prayers' (the old book I am half-tempted to covet), and he showed us a passage which, as he expressed it, often made him set sail again among the fair green islands: 'Most benigne Jesu! grant me Thy grace that it may alway worke and continue to the ende, that I may rest in Thee, and fully quiet and pacifie myself in Thee. For Thou Lord art the very true peace, and the perfect rest of the soul, and without Thee all things be grievous and unquiet. For Thou Lord God art best, most wise, most high, most mighty, most sufficient, and most full of all goodness, most sweete, and most loving, most faire, most glorious, therefore my heart may not rest, ne fully be pacified, but only in Thee. To whom be glory and honour.'"

"Amen," said the rector, softly, as Linda folded the paper, and he stood beside her. "You have

been learning one of old Godfrey's lessons, I see, or rather one that a goodly band of Christians have learnt from its pages, more than two hundred years ago. Kings and subjects alike have found comfort there, and now in these enlightened days of endless religious books it stands out still brighter by comparison with the best of them."

"Because, perhaps," said Mrs. Gresley, "it desires to reflect the light of Holy Scripture rather than its own."

"You are right," replied Mr. Conway, as he led his sister into the drawing-room for the tea, which Joyce Archer announced. "We, who have passed through many a penetrating cloud of sorrow, know how to set true value upon the guiding star of God's Word. We believe that it leads to one far brighter."

CHAPTER IV.

THE CASEMENT WARILY OPENS.

"Sing on, ye little blithesome bird, nor heed the wintry day;
The snow falls thick, the branch is bare, but sing that merry lay.
Sing on of brighter days to come—of comforts yet in store
Sing on!—and Robin's answering note was sweeter than before."
E. M. L.

OLIVE GRESLEY was by no means inclined to take an equal interest in all her cousin's employments, especially as regarded Hazelmere and its parishioners; but she made occasional efforts to be useful, according to the whim of the moment. She would sit patiently in the village school, with Primer in hand, teaching an idle and vexatious child its two-syllable lesson, because its golden curls and blue eyes pleased her fancy; while she declined to notice the plain little eager face and earnest mind that almost asked to be taught, as Linda led it forward from another class and whispered that it "deserved encouragement." She would listen with untiring attention to old Godfrey Norman's stories of the old sea-life—for his native

politeness had won lasting favour; and even Martha Lloyd, who worried every one, had contrived to establish an interest in herself and her cough; but nothing, no, nothing would induce her to endure Rina Cliffe for an instant.

"I can read every line in that ill-favoured face," she would say; "and I am convinced that not even the sunshine of your presence, fair cousin Linda, could brighten anything so dark and forbidding. No, indeed, I shall keep at a safe distance from Rina Cliffe, and advise you to do the same."

These discouraging remarks did not add to Linda's comfort. Nevertheless she persevered in her appointed visits to the Edge, patiently enduring Rina's uncertain moods, meeting a sullen temper with cheerfulness, and ever doing her utmost to turn aside the frequent torrent of angry words into a smoother and more hopeful channel. Difficult indeed was the effort, and small the success which seemed to attend it; yet this much at least was accomplished—Rina had confessed that it was "mighty pleasant" to hear her read.

More than once Linda had been welcomed with a grim smile; the oak settle had been pushed

aside to make room for a low rush-seated chair, and even Black Milly's three-legged stool had been placed for her visitor's feet. If, however, Rina's politeness showed itself for a moment, it was as quickly disguised by word or action. She would make up her fire, but the sticks were broken up snappishly, and even the kettle had a rough bit of handling before it could settle itself to sing in comfort in the bright cheery blaze. Even the kettle! Yes, in truth; for, if Rina had a friend in the world to soothe her mind and quiet her temper, that friend was the kettle, —at least so Linda thought, and experience had suggested the idea; for no sooner did its soft sing-song sound commence, than Rina's pattens were left in the inner doorway, noisy Jacket was sent flying through the porch, a clean hurden apron tied carefully on, and she herself sat down quietly to listen. But wait a moment. It was one of Rina's oddities that she never could or would attempt to pay the least attention to the reader unless she had found and carefully affixed a pair of venerable-looking spectacles into her wide cap border. With their aid, in days long gone by, Rina's mother had been wont to read her Sunday chapter in the old Bible,

and without them now it would have been useless for the kettle to sing ever so invitingly—

"Sit down, rest still; rest still, Rina Cliffe."

Their use to her as a listener might be considered doubtful, yet she never failed to require them; they might be taken off at intervals to be polished by her rough apron or handkerchief, but on no occasion were they ever laid aside. Perhaps some of the truthful words in "the Book" touched her heart in its hidden depths and dimmed her eyes: it was difficult to guess, for as Linda read the chapter no words were spoken between them, and afterwards Rina hardly varied her comment:—

"Ah, well, God bless us all! Good reading that, and no doubt we ought so to do."

If the subject could be turned to the account of her neighbours, Rina Cliffe had more to say about it. She would shake her head significantly, and fit the counsel or warning readily enough to suit each case.

So might one portion of a goodly corn-field look upon its waving fellows and say, "See, the gay, flaunting poppies are growing thickly among you, and the ill-scented charlock is destroying your sweetness. Here, at this end of our field, we

are free from such mischievous acquaintance. Lift up your heads, my brothers, and rejoice; no such evil seed has been encouraged near us." But alas for them! the tender shoots of the clinging bindweed is winding itself round every stem, and they feel it not. Wait a while, it will grow strong and bear them down with its weight. There is no room for boasting; the wheat and the destroying bindweed must fall together.

"Rina," said Linda Conway, as a promising smile greeted her entrance, "I have been thinking that the long lonely hours you complain of so much might be made less lonely if you could but learn to read yourself; and I feel sure that, with my help and daily practice, you would quickly regain the knowledge of reading you once had in old Mrs. Oakley's school. Your memory is no ordinary one, and that would lessen your trouble."

"Well," replied Rina, "perhaps I might manage to spell out a word or two. You see when my Geoffrey was alive I had no need for it: he was a good scholar, but I never liked my book."

Linda had not forgotten to bring one of Simpson's Primers, and she at once opened it at page No. 1—The Alphabet.

"I 'm not going to learn out of that, so don't

think it. I won't say my letters regular off," said Rina, bluntly; "I 'll begin with 'the Book,' and make it out from Obadiah: I'm more used to that."

So Linda's first lesson began under difficulties with the ominous letter O! But when the first three verses had been carefully spelt over, she found her perverse old pupil had been storing up in that wonderful memory of hers even such long words as "ambassador" and "habitation," and was more than likely to recognise them again.

"Ah," said Rina, as she closed the book, "my grandson had no more need to spell a word than our rector. It was beautiful to hear him read the 1st chapter of St. Matthew; we had it regular on Christmas-day. The hard names were as easy to him as his alphabet."

Rina's face grew dark as her thoughts turned towards poor Owen. "He wants me to send him this book," she said. "'Grandmother, if ever you have the chance, let me have my grandfather's large Bible that he left me; there's nothing else that I care to have.' See, those are his words, I pasted them in the cover. No doubt he'd like it well enough, but he won't get it. No, no; I've good reason for keeping it too. As long as I live that

book shall never be transported; and 'Lisbeth Cliffe's name shan't be written down there, next to my Geoffrey's and Owen's christening. That wedding-day shall never blacken this page; no, indeed, I'll take care of Owen's Bible safe enough."

Linda scarcely replied, the subject was too dangerous to Rina Cliffe's temper to bear discussion; so, taking the heavy book from her hands, she placed it on the small table before her, and opened it at the chapter she had left unfinished before. Rina put on her spectacles to listen as usual, but she was evidently in an uneasy mood still, for she poked the embers continually with the toasting-fork, or altered the position of the tea-kettle, so that Linda could hardly hear herself read the holy precept, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

"Ah, well," said Rina, shaking her head wisely, "good reading that. Now if Madam Hardie would take notice of it she'd not be hoarding her riches, and giving no thought to poor folk that are in want. They do say she pampers that curly dog of hers, and gives it food fit for a prince to eat. Bad, bad! It goes against all reason to give a dog cream out of a china saucer, but she does; and yet when

I asked for a little skim milk for my supper the servant told me there was none. It was all sent up to the Hill Farm for the creatures. It isn't that I want it, but it's the look of the thing."

"Never mind about Mrs. Hardie now," said Linda, gently; "we are reading a chapter that should lead us to question ourselves rather than our neighbours. Listen, 'Take therefore no thought for the morrow.'"

"No, to be sure," interrupted Rina, in a sharp tone, "that's just what I said to Joan Price. 'Joan,' I said, 'you've a mind to make me take care of your morrow as well as my own.' And that wasn't the meaning of it. 'You never care how much others work and toil to pay their way, so that you get what you want yourself.' The text don't excuse laziness—no! I tell you what, Miss Conway, Joan and her idle son Martin have had bread from me since harvest, off and on, and when my pay-day came for the baker I went to her and asked for the money; but, oh dear no! there was none for me—I must wait. I went again: 'Mrs. Price,' I said, 'aren't you ashamed of yourself to owe a poor widow such a sum?' She made no answer, though I gave her a piece of my mind. Next day I found the door locked, but I soon rattled the

window open, and called her the names she deserves; those she gave me back again, but never a shilling of her money."

"We can talk about Joan Price another time," said Linda, making a second appeal; "I want a few quiet moments just to finish our chapter; the words we are reading will help you to meet these vexations."

"It's no use, madam, I'm vexed past bearing. I'll put her in the county court as sure as my name is Verina Cliffe. I will have my money. She's a good-for-nothing thief, and nothing better. As to Martin, the impudent young vagabond, I'll mend his manners; he shall go before the justices as sure as I say it."

Linda closed the book with a sigh. "I did not come here, Rina, to hear about your neighbours; I came to read to you, and to think over it quietly with you, not to apply the words to others but ourselves."

"Ah, well," said Rina, in an aggrieved tone, "you're no kinder than the rest of them then; nobody minds my troubles. I'd starve sooner than not pay my way, and how am I to do it if folks won't pay me what they owe? Look at that clock!"

Linda turned towards it wonderingly. The dingy

oak case was lowered some inches into the floor, and yet towered up to the well-smoked ceiling. It was at that moment striking four, and it did so as if every stroke was a vicious hit at Joan Price's door, and echoed its mistress's sentiments. It growled and snarled too before each vibration as if it was ill-natured also on its own account; while, to relieve this spiteful disposition, the heavy pendulum gave a constant dull thump against the case as it swung to and fro.

Any one than its owner would have been made miserable by such a companion; but there was no doubt as to her idea of its value. It had belonged to the Cliffe family for generations, and had been destined for Owen before he was disinherited. No doubt he preferred his little wife's bright face to the dull metal one which would have been bequeathed to him; but however that might be, the clock sulkily ticked on in its old corner, and was looked upon by Rina as one of her most valuable possessions.

It was her day-book and ledger, both for her own account with the baker, and also for those customers who failed to pay the required ready money. This was done by certain marks of her own, which represented, in white chalk crosses and

strokes, a sum of money she would have been thankful to realise. Among other debts which appeared on its dark shining panels Rina pointed out two formidable lines, they read thus:—

× — × × — × × ×
× × — × × × × ×

and they stood against Joan Price and her son Martin: a debt of fourteen shillings and sixpence.

"See there!" exclaimed Rina; "if the justices want proof I have got enough of it. That will show you what a sight of bread Joan Price has had from me. It's a shame—robbery, I call it—but I mean to have my rights; into the county court she shall go, and not another loaf of mine shall she taste, nor Martin, no, not if they were starving."

"Do you know," said Linda, "that in spite of all your anger this long account on the old clock tells me that you have had kindness in your heart towards Joan, and proved it too, otherwise you would not have allowed the debt to increase from time to time with so small a chance of payment."

"Joan misled me by fine stories about her sister in London helping her," argued Rina; "but I've found out her tricks, and I'll see whether the county court can find her sister or no."

At this unfortunate moment Rina Cliffe dis-

covered her enemy unconsciously and quietly drawing water from the opposite well; it was the signal for an attack such as Linda Conway had never heard before, nor could ever stay to hear. She had hoped many times that some softening influence was at work in Rina's hard nature, but the hope vanished now. Was it for ever? All she knew was, that in her last glimpse of the cottage on the Edge the only peaceful sight was that of Black Milly asleep on the thatch, for in the open doorway Rina still stood in a threatening attitude, shaking her broad fist towards the small bent figure by the well; whilst Jacket, fully alive to his danger, flew with a startled cry into his refuge, the tall St. Katherine pear-tree, and there kept up a mimic quarrel, echoing Rina's shrill tones in a highly excited state.

Linda Conway's thoughts took a very dark colouring from the picture before her, and she crossed the common in an anything but happy mood. Who is there has not felt that depressing companionship;—not the black-veiled figure which enters our hearts in its sorrowful moments, and shuts out, as it were for ever, all hope of earthly happiness and peace, but the quiet grey dress of the sister who glides into our minds like a shadow, whispering disheartening words and ill omens for

the future, and pointing, as we listen, to the cloud-hidden sunset and misty twilight, until we forget that a bright sunrise might follow?

This grave companion in the sad-coloured dress followed Linda across the Farheath Common; but in the smooth green meadows, where the old parish church and its circling elms cast a long, still shade, the rector's welcome voice and pleasant greeting banished the haunting monitor, though she lingered once and again to listen as she heard her own familiar tone saddening the words which caught her ear.

"I thought once, papa, it was possible to gain some good influence over poor Rina, and even fancied that I saw a sign of improvement in her, as each time I found her more civil and willing to listen to my reading; but to-day I feel quite hopeless: her ungovernable tongue was utterly unchecked by my presence—perhaps she gets more used to me, and is at less pains to control her wicked temper. However that may be, I have certainly done no good to her, and my own peace of mind is fairly disturbed. Papa, do you ever feel so thoroughly disheartened as this?"

Mr. Conway's quiet smile answered the question. "I can only say, my dear child, that the work of

influence is often very slow and silent in its progress. If you see a little advancement in the right direction you may be well content; and I take it to be such, that Rina Cliffe is now an attentive listener to your reading, whereas she had once scarcely a civil word for you. You need not be discouraged; at the same time, do not make her or her temper a care,—indeed I would recommend you, for more than one reason, to lengthen the interval between your visits. I am greatly mistaken if she does not set a high value upon my little bird's pleasant song."

Linda smiled. "It was rather cold and cheerless to sing upon such a wintry bough, with only a glimpse now and then through the casement of the warm fire and friendly crumbs within. I suppose that is my excuse, papa, for wearying of the mission."

"We all need reminding of the condition belonging to success; the 'due time' seems so slow to our impatience, yet it surely will be ours 'if we faint not.'"

"Thank you, papa," said Linda, brightening up in thought and tone at his encouraging words; "I will take your advice. But why ought I to see less of Rina, if I am obliged to own I have done her

so little good already? Surely the less pains I take the less chance there is of success."

"Because," replied Mr. Conway, "apart from the relief to yourself, which I naturally consider, I think it very possible to lose influence by too much intercourse with the poor. I remember your dear mother saying that we should feel it so in our own case, if we were subject to incessant visits from our lordly neighbours. She remarked, too, that care was needed even in the matter of a gift, for the poor will soon take as a right what we, from a sense of duty, make a great effort to give."

"Ah, yes, papa, but my gifts to Rina are very few; indeed, I find her more willing to give than to receive. The last rose on her tree, the rosiest apple on her window-ledge, are all at my service. As to the remark one hears so often about the selfishness and ingratitude of the poor, I do not believe in its truth, as far as my small experience can testify."

Mr. Conway smiled. "You must believe in the fact that human nature, unchanged by the Holy Spirit's power, fails lamentably in both those points. Nevertheless, ingratitude is often caused by the gift being offered in a graceless manner. Your mother had a wonderful influence with the poor; she

was more beloved and honoured by them than any one I ever knew, and I think the secret of their regard for her was the perfect courtesy of her every action. It was a natural grace in her character, made more lovely by a Christ-like charity."

"I well remember it, papa, and I could not help contrasting her kindly habit of civility to all with that of our charitable neighbour here at Woodley Court. I suppose nothing would induce Miss Cecilia Percy to call at the Rectory out of due course, or without a proper announcement from her footman. Yet she sees no impropriety, no rudeness, in making an abrupt entrance into a cottage where the family are gathered round their simple meal—in fact, it is the very intention of her visit—to make remarks upon their food, and advise this or that as better or cheaper. Only this morning I hear she has taken up a new theory, and is making a tour of the parish to recommend it. Her mission is to inform the poor that boiled rice and parsnips contain more nourishment, at a less cost, than any other food!"

"I must tell Miss Percy that if she wishes to encourage the rice-system, her best plan would be to order a bag at once, and let those who like to

test it come and fetch a supply; it can do no harm. But, for my own part, I never think an English cottager would call boiled rice satisfying, or that anything would take the place, to him, of the steaming round dish of bacon flanked by potatoes; or the more savoury mess in which fried onions and sliced carrots take the larger share.

Linda smiled. "Listen, papa," she said, "that is Miss Cecilia's most punctual dinner-bell; only suppose that we ventured to call there at this unseasonable moment, just to give her a little personal experience on the subject, and to ascertain whether she has selected boiled rice for her own little refreshment!"

"Hush, hush!" said the rector, and "For shame!" said a voice close to them, as Olive Gresley came forward from her hiding-place behind a pollard ash which guarded the turnstile. "No wonder you look alarmed that your last remark with regard to Miss Percy has been overheard. I suppose you have been to see your gentle friend Rina Cliffe; did she tell you that when Miss Percy recommended the rice-system to her notice, the old woman told her to go and try it herself for a week, and slammed the door in her face without even a good morning? Alas for your worthy pupil!

She shut at the same moment Miss Cecilia's purse, and, what is worse, her charitable heart, against her. 'Never again,' said Miss Percy, 'will I subject myself to such rudeness—never again!'"

Linda quickly changed her place in the pathway and left her father to reply, and to inquire what had given them the pleasure of this chance meeting.

"I have simply been following my fancy in a delightfully independent fashion," said Olive. "First I sketched old Norman's picturesque cabin, including his white pigeons and himself; I made him look most effective in the doorway, with his blue cap a little on one side. Then I filled my basket with some choice mosses and lichens; see, are they not beautiful?"

"Ah, yes," replied Linda, "and I know where you found them. The lichen, with its tiny silver cups, grows upon the palings which divide the open field from one of Mr. Hardie's covers; and the moss you could only get on the broken bank near Rachel Vale's cottage. Olive, did you call there? Have you seen Rachel?"

"Yes," replied Olive, in a quiet voice. "I knew you dreaded the first visit there after Bessie's death, and wished to hear of them, so I went; I

am glad I did, for I don't often see such simple folk. There was something so genuine in their grief; I was all but crying too when little Marty disappeared from her small stool in the corner, and laid poor Bessie's pictures on my knee. 'See here!' she said, 'this is a little lamb in the Shepherd's arms; mother says it's like Bessie. And look at these beautiful angels, like those that came to fetch her. That is the Crucifixion; Bessie was always looking at it. She taught me a carol all about it, and I shall sing it at Christmas to Miss Linda, along with Nelly and Mercy Lloyd. Mother said I was too little to go last year, and she 'most thinks I am now; but Bessie said if I went, we should be singing together, though I couldn't see her. These were her pictures, all of them; but she gave them to me, and a box to put them in.'"

"Dear child!" said Linda, "they were her great treasures; and I believe it was because they had pictured to her mind the life of our Saviour; perhaps, too——"

"There is no perhaps in the question," replied Olive; "I am sure of it. Her mother told me that when she died they were all spread round her on the bed; she had been asleep for some time—a

refreshing sleep it seemed to be. 'Mother,' she said at length, 'find me my best picture, and let us look at it together. Do you see that Cross and who is on it? I seem to know all about it now, and I wish I hadn't ever been a naughty child. I told Him so this morning, and He seemed to listen, and now I am going to Him. He won't be like this, mother.' She laid her head back on the pillow. 'We can't talk any more just yet,' she said, quietly, 'for I want to go to sleep.' Presently her mother came back and looked at her; she was indeed asleep, but not to wake again in this life."

Linda could not speak just then, and Olive, in her own restless fashion, changed the subject. "Who is it, Linda, that Rachel called the friend of Hazelmere? She showed me a book of prayers and several other treasures, including a fragile-looking basket: the slight handle tied on with some faded ribbon made it a precious thing because her hand had done it."

"She was speaking to you of my mother," replied Linda, quietly. "Her gifts, however small, are treasured still, and her words are as faithfully remembered. Even Rina Cliffe in her most uncivil mood will listen if I speak of her."

"Rina was rather less cross in those well-

remembered days," said Mr. Conway. "Geoffrey had not left her to fight life's battle alone, and Owen had not transported himself to Australia. Rina's is one of those hard natures that do not bend to the driving storm, but resist it steadily to their own injury."

"Yet she too, papa, has her softening memories, and like us all can point to a treasure store. There is the oak clock that was her grandfather's, the old Bible, and the spectacles; some pleasant story of the past belongs to all, even in Rina's ungentle mind. Only the other day I was admiring some old-fashioned earthenware on her shelves, and she astonished me by saying that, much as she set store by them, she would rather lose all than the one plain china plate which had the central place among them. I turned to look at the treasure, and took it up, wondering why it was of such value. 'Mind!' she exclaimed, in a voice startling enough to risk its safety; 'that bit of china was your dear mother's, and it is all I have to look at of hers. She gave it me, and my Christmas dinner on it, years ago. I said, "I'm not mighty gentle in handling such things, but I don't think I shall ever lose the sight of that off my shelf while I live;" and I never have.'"

"Poor Rina!" said the rector, gravely; "if she would but have treasured some of the good counsel she has had as carefully as that frail relic, her life would have been a better and happier one than it has been. Yes, Linda, the simple tribute tells us that the memory of your mother is still beloved in Hazelmere." As he spoke he turned to the lych-gate before him and passed into the quiet churchyard.

"How they so softly rest,
All, all, the holy dead,
Here where complaint is still;
And by the cypresses
Softly o'ershadowed
Until the Angel calls them, they slumber."

"Those lines suit this place," remarked Olive; "it is so still and quiet here, even the frost has trod lightly over the graves. These bordering chrysanthemums are white and unsullied still."

An often-trod pathway near the chancel led to the dark granite altar-tomb, with its white inlaid cross, where the ever-beloved name of Evalinda Conway was graven, deep as upon the hearts of those who stood together there, and who read it still with tears. Then the peaceful remembrance of her sweet life stole silently into their thoughts; it soothed Linda's lingering disquiet, as her mother's voice had so often done, and it gave a strangely

calm expression to the rector's face as he stooped to guard the clustering buds of a white Christmas rose, touching them with a careful hand as he repeated—

"Labour and toil are past; one love, one rest to last
Ever shall meet thee
In that bright citadel, where around Jesus dwell
Saints who will greet thee.

"How fair the lilies blow, as through those meads they go;
All sins forgiven!
Sweet flowers of every hue smile as they wander through
The vales of heaven."

CHAPTER V.

THE MATIN SONG.

"The churchyard stones, all green with moss,
Bright Robin knew them well,
But oftener chose the lichened cross
His orisons to tell." E. M. L.

JOYCE ARCHER was an old servant at the Rectory. She might have received the title of housekeeper, but that the chief part of her time was spent in the work-room; on the other hand, it would be equally incorrect to have called her a seamstress, for the store of preserved fruits and the Rector's old-fashioned plate were alike under her care. To this she added the charge of Linda Conway's birds, and a very important tribe of Dorkings and golden Hamburghs. She had also extensive window-gardening to attend to—rows of lemon-scented geranium and verbenum, ferns and creeping cedars. Last, though above all in Joyce Archer's estimation, the care of her master's library; to dust

which, and to declare that no one but herself ever touched book or paper, was her especial pride.

It seemed that in whatever capacity she could best render faithful service, there she laid claim to the work. And now, in the early December morning, still nearing that brightest of December days, the welcome Christmas-tide, Joyce Archer was as usual astir, and ready for her varied employments. A bright fire gleamed through the library door as she turned to give a look at its satisfactory condition; and then, after looking at the old clock on the stairs, she gave a knock at her young mistress's door, and, shading the candle with her hand, drew aside the slight curtain.

"Bless her pretty face! she looks very sweetly asleep," said Joyce, half regretfully; "but it's no use, I have given her the last minute. Yes, Miss Linda," she said, in a louder voice, "you must wake up, it's full time. Mr. Conway has had his breakfast ever so long ago, for there has been a stir in the village, and he is gone to Farheath to see into it. You and Miss Olive were to meet him at the church, he said."

"Something up in the village, and papa gone to Farheath! What is it, Joyce?" inquired Linda, rousing up.

"I will tell you presently," said Joyce Archer, who dearly loved to excite an interest in any news fairly in her own possession, and as fondly delayed the telling. "I must go and call Miss Olive now; but I will be back as soon as you are ready for me, and then I can dress your hair, and tell you about it."

Linda made no attempt to detain her, knowing by experience it would be only a loss of time to do so; but she rose hastily, and, with a merry laugh, repeated half aloud, "Ah, Joyce, you cannot put it down yet, it is too choice a morsel!"

This remark was suggested by the recollection of a scene which had greatly amused Olive and herself at the poultry yard of the Hamburgh family, as they stood to watch the enjoyment of a fresh bowl full of rice and potatoes. Dame Bridget, who was the head of the household, and "ought to have set a better example," Olive had remarked, secured for herself the largest and most tempting prize, and carried it off in triumph from one hiding-place to another, followed by the whole tribe, until she had wearied them out; even then she could hardly make up her mind where to put it down, or when to enjoy it. "So like our good Joyce Archer," thought Linda, "when she has found an

astonishing piece of news. Well, I must wait until the right time comes to hear it; but I do wonder what has taken papa to Farheath so early?"

She might have asked the question to some purpose, as Joyce reappeared at that moment; but apparently she had no further curiosity on the subject. "I must make good use of my time to-day, Archer," remarked Linda, with provoking indifference to the promised news. "I have not finished the illuminated border to my last text; and we must take a survey of the shrubbery to select our evergreens, and arrange the plan of our decorations."

"Very well, Miss Linda," replied Joyce, slowly closing the dressing-box before her and her eyes at the same moment. "I should have thought you would probably walk to Farheath this morning; but of course I will look after the evergreens if you wish it."

"Why should I go to Farheath, Archer?" said Linda, tossing aside her glossy hair to give a sly look at Joyce. "I was there yesterday, you remember."

"Oh, I supposed you might be anxious to know which way things would turn; but of course master will hear all about it. They said she was

taken up for dead; but I dare say there was no truth in the story. Yes, Miss Linda, I think we had better collect the evergreens. You liked the common fir as a groundwork last year, with the holly tied over it; then I suppose you will have yew for the pillar wreaths, with the variegated laurel or ivy; and——"

"Anything you like, Joyce," interrupted Linda, "so that you will tell me what is the matter. Who or what has been taken up for dead?"

"Nothing that will be missed," replied Joyce Archer, coolly. "You need not look so startled, Miss Linda; I only wanted to rouse you up when I said there was a stir in the village. There was a bit of a fuss at first, but nobody cares whether Rina Cliffe is——"

"Rina Cliffe taken up for dead!" exclaimed Linda. "O Joyce, what has happened?"

"Why, Miss Linda, you are as much disturbed as if she was worth troubling about! I know this, that the very men who brought the news to master said to me it would be a good riddance if she was gone, for she made herself well-nigh hated with her evil tongue. I've seen something of her temper, and had my turn with her; and I just tell you, Miss Linda, that I should feel about as much con-

cern if I had heard Black Milly had been found drowned in the mill-pool."

"O Joyce, how unkind! It is not like you to speak in such a hard-hearted manner of any one. Poor Rina! I little thought when I saw her last what a terrible fate was in store for her. Where did they find her?"

"In one of the hollows by the footpath across the common. It was dark and slippery, and she may have fallen from the narrow plank that spanned it. However it happened, she was lying there quite insensible, if not dead. Some workmen belonging to the new line were the first on the road, and they brought the news to Hazelmere. I heard them tell Mr. Conway she might have lain there till daylight if they had not been obliged to strike a light to find their own way across the plank."

"I trust she had not lain there long," said Linda; "the night was cold as well as dark; but we can know nothing further until we see papa after service."

It was not long before Linda was down in the library, and waiting by the bright wood-fire for Olive's first appearance at the early breakfast.

"Good morning," said that young lady at length.

Page 98.

"I have kept my promise, you see; but it is doubtful whether this sharp frost would have allowed me to do so if I had not been fairly roused into activity by Joyce Archer's startling news. So the dangerous Cliffe has fallen, and a real event has occurred in Hazelmere! There seems to be a mystery, too, as to the cause. I should think it will be a lasting excitement to Miss Tryphosa Mills."

"Yes, indeed," replied Linda; "the story about her young servant's inclination for lump-sugar will sink into insignificance after this. But seriously, Olive, is it not very sad about poor Rina? I can scarcely think of anything else."

"I dare say not," said Olive. "Even I, who have not wasted my affections upon her, feel more concern than you would give me credit for. I was quite indignant at Joyce Archer's indifference as to Rina's fate, and told her so; but she only laughed, and said, 'It's nothing worse than she has wished might befall poor 'Lisbeth and Owen a score of times; and if she lives to remember her own words, she may have learnt a good lesson.'"

"I hope so," said Linda, thoughtfully. "We often see that Providence is the wisest teacher, and finds the right mode of instruction after all other

attempts have failed. You remember the words we read yesterday: 'Human justice would heap misery on misery as chastisement for a simple repining; Divine mercy floods the soul with such joy as will far exceed all memory of pain.'"

"A good thought, and I quite agree with it," replied Olive; "but as to my memory, it is so bad that I never can recal a passage. After I have heard it, I wonder it never recurred to me; but I am always too late."

"We must mind we are not too late for the practical duty before us," said Linda, smiling. "Papa is punctual to a moment in beginning the service. I thought we had half-an-hour to spare, but I believe the bell is calling us already."

"I will open the window and listen. Hark, Linda, how sweetly it sounds over the still meadows! Yes, we must be off; but how dark it is still, although the red dawn is coming! The walk will no doubt show me those sunrise effects that you delight in so much."

Surely it had done so, Linda thought, as she caught Olive's quick glance of wondering pleasure, and heard her whispered exclamation while they stood for a moment in the centre aisle. The dawning light through the great east window fell

in soft streams of rich colour on the carved stalls and pavement within—violet and emerald from the borders and scroll-work, and gorgeous crimson from the falling robes of the centre figure, the ascending Christ—made yet more splendid by the gold-red sunrise, which seemed each instant to increase its lustre.

Olive Gresley had never before attended the early service, and she longed to express her delight; but Linda had already taken her place at the organ, and the old Latin hymn by Sarti softly gave the prelude to the morning prayer: its melody speaking the words—

> "When the storms of life confound us,
> And its sorrows gather round us,
> Hear us, Lord! in mercy hear!"

The church was singularly still, and the attention and devotion of the worshippers uninterrupted. It seemed to Olive that she had never before realised so distinctly the beautiful idea of Christ's presence in His Church as now, when they met at earliest dawn in true and simple worship, to give their first thoughts to His service, and, as loving children, to say "Our Father!"

She remarked this to Linda Conway when they had left the church, and stood together under the

shadow of the old lych-gate to wait for the rector, and added, gravely, "I am sure those who speak lightly of such a service, and call it formal, can never have been one of such a congregation as I have seen to-day. I can better understand why you were roused out of your usual timidity to argue the point of its value with Mrs. Southern. You remember, Linda, she treated it as useless in comparison with the excitement of their special service in the Hayford school-room."

"Perhaps," said Linda, "I spoke too warmly to Mrs. Southern; but I could not help feeling that a service which depended upon novelty, and called forth little more than remarks upon the preacher, was less useful than the daily prayers appointed by our own Church, where we professedly meet to show forth His praise and none other. In the one case we hear such remarks as these: 'How earnest the preacher! how eloquent and graceful his language—it was altogether most telling!' In the other, we can but ask ourselves the simple question, Was *I* in earnest? Do I echo from my heart that simple prayer, 'Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ, have mercy upon us'?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Olive, quietly; "those few words in our service are more important to us

than many a long sermon we have attended to only for its pleasant sound. I confess to you that in our crowded church at St. Miniver's we listen in a more critical than devout spirit, and are better able to discuss the sermon as a composition than to apply its elegantly worded teaching to ourselves. My brother Nigel always speaks of us as 'Mr. D'Arcy's admirers.' I could not help thinking this morning how much nearer the congregation we have just left answers to the description of 'sincere worshippers.'"

"Your talk is interesting," remarked Mr. Conway, as he gave a quick glance at Linda's thoughtful face. "I am afraid I have kept you a long time, and must even ask you to return with me for a few moments; the truth is, our old clerk had a longer list than usual for me of things to attend to. Among others, his wife Martha has sent a message concerning some prescription of Mrs. Gresley's for her cough, which I am at a loss to understand; I have referred him to Miss Linda, who will find him waiting in the vestry for her."

Olive laughed. "You generally make Linda listener to Martha Lloyd's complaints; it is scarcely fair, Mr. Conway. But meanwhile, I propose that

you show me the epitaph in the centre aisle, which you promised I should see."

"Very willingly," he replied, as they turned once more to the old church. "It is one which, apart from my connection with the name, I have a great respect for. You see the letters are nearly gone, and must be recut. This covering line of matting is some protection, but it is no use to delay the engraver's work for the sake of a fancy for the original letters."

"So you are looking at our venerated ancestors' grave!" said Linda, as she rejoined them. "I shall be as grieved to see a fresh-cut epitaph there as I was when I found the old sorrowful worn 'miserrimus' stone, in the cloisters at Worcester, recarved and made new again."

"Nevertheless it must be done, or lost for ever," said Mr. Conway. "Old Time is rather regardless of sentiment; he is a practical but rough worker, and it is not often he touches lightly what we value; so that a careful watch is needful. And now let me ask what you were both discussing so earnestly while you were waiting for me under the lych-gate? I suppose it was the question of Rina Cliffe's accident?"

"No, indeed," replied Olive; "we had satisfied

ourselves on that point, and were soberly comparing the merits of different Church services."

"You surely had not ventured a comparison between your aristocratic congregation at St. Miniver's and the simple worshippers here in our village?" said Mr. Conway, as he closed the heavy door upon that quiet church. "What had you to say about it, Linda? I hope your line of defence was strong for Hazelmere?"

Linda smiled. "The argument was all on one side, so that my loyal devotion to our own church was unchallenged. Olive is delighted with the early service, and I was just going to repeat to her some lines I read yesterday, which pleased me very much. I think you will like them too:

"'Surely 'tis meet that there should rise,
Like a sweet incense to the skies,
Morning and evening sacrifice.

"'So come, and be each day begun
By gathering, like the morning sun,
Fresh strength thy daily course to run.

"'And when life's battle shall be done,
The sin o'erthrown, the guerdon won,
And thou art owned a faithful son,

"'Perchance thy heart may then declare
The strength that could such conflict bear
Was sought and gained in daily prayer.'"

"So that was my little Robin's matin song," said the rector quietly, with his own especial look

at the happy face beside him. "It is a very sweet one too; and that reminds me, by its strange association with anything so rough, of poor Rina Cliffe. You will be anxious to hear the real tidings of her, although I charged Joyce Archer not to give you an alarming version of the story."

"Archer scarcely led us to hope she was living," replied Linda; "but we have since heard a more favourable account. I hope it was correct."

"She has been seriously hurt, but not to the extent that was at first imagined. She has recovered her senses, and is only too eager to give every one the full account of her misfortune. I left Dr. Percy in rather a difficult position. There was a double fracture to attend to, and he has a most unquiet patient. He had sent for his brother from Hayford, and expected they would soon 'settle the business' for her, and be able to 'report on the case.'"

"Meanwhile," said Olive, "do tell us how the accident happened. We have heard more than one account of it already, and believe none."

"It is very possible that you may almost doubt mine, for it is a singular one. I should have hesitated myself to believe Rina Cliffe so wanting in common sense, if I had not heard it from her own confession.

"It seems that yesterday evening a pedlar came to her cottage with his wares, and showed her, among other valuables, a large map of Australia, and something that he called a gold nugget. The map was inconvenient to hold and must be laid on the table, and the glistening gold could not be seen in the dark porch; so it was by the fireside that the conversation was carried on between them. If Rina had any friends out there, she had only to put on her spectacles and he could show her where they were, and how far from the place where the gold was to be found. He had been making a great fortune, and only returned from the diggings a few months since, in order to take care of his aged parents. He had now provided for them, and was on his way back to refill his purse.

"This was a wonderful stroke of policy, and the dutiful conduct called forth Rina's never-failing story of Owen Cliffe's marriage and emigration, and her own deserted and uncared-for condition. Thus, by suggesting a few words of his own, and listening with keen interest, he made himself fully acquainted with Rina's affairs, while she was beguiled into offering him a share in the contents of her black teapot, and some muffins.

"During this sociable meal, it was discovered that the pedlar, who called himself Jerry Johnson, had known Owen Cliffe for two years 'at the very least'; and as they had worked together so long for a Mr. Leonard Hardie, who, he believed, had a brother somewhere near here, he could answer for it he was doing right well, and likely enough to come back to England with a ship full of money, well able to buy a farm, as he often said he should do, 'near the old place,' for his dear grandmother.

"'O my! did he say that? Did my dear boy say he was meaning to come home?' she exclaimed.

"'Not only thinking about it,' said the kind traveller; 'for when I told him I had taken my passage in the "Phosphorus," and what a fine ship she was, with her four engines and ten paddle-wheels, and an iron locker as big as this room for nothing but gold nuggets, he said, 'Jerry, you speak to the cap'en for me. As sure as ever the "Phosphorus" leaves Melbourne again, I shall be one of the passengers for old England.'

"'Well, to be sure!' said Rina, 'it's surprising. He never said a word in his last letter that he was coming. "I am doing well, grandmother," he said; but, dear me! I never thought what

"doing well" meant. They seem to get rich at a mighty pace out there: I hope it's got honestly, and not by any tricks and jugglings. Owen was always straightforward and downright, and it isn't just like him to keep the truth in the background.'

"'I dare say not,' replied her guest; 'but he meant to do it "surprising." He knows how to lift the latch and find his way in, and a good welcome.'

"'Ah, that he does, and the child shall too; but not 'Lisbeth. No; she shall never lift the latch of my door.'

"In this kind of exciting talk the evening wore away. Johnson had much to say of Australian life, and Rina was a ready listener; but at length he declared he must be off, and she bustled away to prepare supper for him. This he refused. 'Give me some water from the cool well, and I'll say thank you, and be on my journey. I've travelled with your grandson miles and miles in Australia, and we took nothing but fresh water from the spring—we were that temperate, and it's grown into a habit.'

"Rina put on her pattens and took her jug to the well, but the cord had got entangled, and

she was some time unfastening it. She heard nothing more than the sound of the rusty chain on the windlass, and no one passed near her; yet, when she returned to the house, the pedlar was gone.

"She thought it strange, and waited for his re-appearance; but after standing to listen in the doorway until she shivered with the cold, she gave up the idea of seeing him again, and drew in the latch-string for the night: then, remembering that next day her rent was due to Squire Hardie, she went to her ledger-book (the old clock), counted a certain number of strokes on the side panel to see the amount required, and opened the clock-case. A pair of old shoes hung within: one of these she took to the light and turned it over on the table—for in this strange place Rina Cliffe kept her savings for the year, the other hiding-place being devoted to her daily receipts. It was empty! No use to shake it, or turn it over and over—nothing of the treasure remained! Perhaps she had brought the wrong one, was her hope, though there ought to have been eighteenpence there; but, alas! the other shoe was equally rifled of its contents, and Rina's bright sovereigns, so hardly earned, were gone!

"In dismay and confusion, and no slight rage, she thought of the pedlar. The dark cold night was no hindrance, and she started off at once to give the alarm. A distant sound of voices led her towards the common, and there she caught her foot in crossing the narrow plank and fell.

"How long she may have lain there she has no idea; but she is likely to lie long enough where she is at present, Dr. Percy says, if she recovers the shock, which at her age is at least doubtful."

"Poor Rina! this is sad news, papa."

"Yet who knows what great good may result from it?" he replied; "it takes a stronger force than the chisel to shape the rough, hard granite that is hereafter to be polished and made fit for its appointed place in the church."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAROL ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

"White snow lies thick upon the ground, and all about the door;
The children's footsteps gather round, where none had trod before.
Yes, there is one that all along is printed on the snow,
For thus, to carol Christmas songs, children and Robin go."

E. M. L.

EVALINDA and her cousin Olive Gresley stood in the window of the library, silently admiring the peaceful scene before them; it was Christmas eve, and a fair night to usher in so fair a morn. The wide-stretching fields, white and glistening in the moonlight, scarcely showed a trace of the hedge-rows interlining them, except that here and there a tall pollard ash or willow stood out dark and rugged, like an ancient landmark no storm had dared to remove. But yesterday their shadows fell across green meadows and furrowed lines of tender wheat or rougher fallow; now they were laid in more distinct lines upon a snow-white pall, pure and unsullied. Hazelmere hid its clustering cottages among the shades of the guardian trees

and hill, bringing out its own beautiful church alone, for the glorious moonlight to light each window in the clerestory and basement with pale transparent lustre, and to touch with silver tracing each inwrought niche, or pinnacle, or boldly outlined buttress.

"What an exquisite evening!" exclaimed Olive at length; "I think it would even inspire Nigel with a fraction of sentiment. I see you are not unmoved by it. Give me the benefit of your thoughts, unless you have been wasting ideas, like I have, in our long silence."

Linda smiled. "I was just repeating to myself some lines which may answer you:

"'Far-stretching snow-clad uplands, glistening bright,
Like robes of holy saints, so pure and white,
Lay in their wondrous beauty, heavenly fair,
Silver'd with moonlight's soft and misty air.

"'A guardian angel to my soul drew nigh,
And whispered softly, Thou, alas, must die!
Pray that Christ's robe of purity may be
Laid up in store at heaven's gate for thee.'"

"You were thinking of the pure, fresh-fallen snow," said Olive. "Yes, its association with heavenly purity is natural, but I had not thought of it before. My ideas fly away, like the swallows, which we look for as usual on a fine autumn day, and find, to our surprise, that they are all

gone off over the wide seas. In this instance they were put to flight by the haunting notes of that strange tune we listened to when we had left the church and passed the first group of carol-singers. Listen while I sing a verse, and tell me if I am correct in it, for I intend to keep a specimen of Hazelmere carols."

"Yes, that is undeniably one of our village tunes," said Linda; "you have given the right accent to the last note, and marked the time in true country fashion. I copied it lately from one of Lloyd's old books, together with these lines, which were written above it:

"'Search all the holy writ, and you will find in it
'Tis a thing most meet, to praise the Lord
With organ and with lute, with cymbal and with flute,
And voices that do shout, all in the concord.'

And now I will add another to your collection, which had so pleasant an association with my childish days that I shall always have a lingering admiration for it. The style is spirited and the time *exigéant* in its precision."

"You like that? impossible!" exclaimed Olive, in dismay. "The familiar words, I grant you, are always worth hearing; but the tune is an utterly wild composition, only to be found and caught in such places as a remote country village. I shall

certainly take a copy of it with me to Richmond Terrace, and write beneath it, As wonderful as rare."

"I suppose your idea is that such tunes are gradually becoming extinct," remarked Linda, "like some of the strange birds in our waste lands and woods—the bittern for instance, or the heavy-winged bustard. If you take that view of the Hazelmere carols, I am glad you are going to preserve a specimen; but, Olive, before you really judge its merits wait until midnight, and then, as you hear it sung in full chorus by our band of singers passing on to the belfry, you will, I think, change your opinion. It has always been one of our village customs for the ringers to meet at St. Chad's Cross, beyond the Rectory, half an hour before midnight on Christmas eve, and then to walk together to the church singing both those old hymns; presently a merry peal takes it up, and Christmas is rung in with right good will. The hour passes, the bells fall to a chime, and the ringers return in the same manner, only giving an anthem of the same style and date instead of the carols. I have listened to that village band with more pleasure than to many a grand review march. Yes, Olive, you must wait until midnight before you can appreciate the tune 'Nativity.'"

"What singular music you have just been playing," remarked Mrs. Gresley, as she opened the library door, and called them to the drawing-room fireside and tea. "It began like a march, but it certainly ended in a kind of dismal chant."

Olive laughed. "That is one of Linda's favourite pieces, mamma, and you must be prepared to hear and admire it, she says, instead of enjoying your night's rest by-and-bye. The good people of Hazelmere seem to make a vigil of Christmas eve; I have scarcely had a moment's quiet. At present we are subject to detachments of children under the window; their voices are so sweet, it is impossible to help listening, and——"

"And that involves a long distance from the fire," suggested Mrs. Gresley.

"Truly it does; and as if that was not enough of a good thing, mamma, we are all to be roused out of our first sleep by the Hazelmere ringers marching to the belfry and singing in full chorus that same wonderful tune to the old Christmas hymn. The bells ring unceasingly for an hour, but when the midnight peal is over, and we are delightfully asleep again, the waits follow in successive companies beneath the windows."

"And very sweet you will think the music,"

remarked Linda; "it will die off into your dreams."

"Possibly it may," replied Olive, "for our day's work of decoration has fairly tired me out, and it will be a far easier matter to sleep than to listen."

"The time to rest has not come yet," said Mrs. Gresley, "for I quite expect you to give the Rectory a few Christmas touches. Joyce Archer has kept a basket of choice holly in store for the purpose, and I have been gathering some bright berries for you; but you shall be rewarded beforehand for your trouble. See here! I have had a letter from our dear Nigel at last."

"How welcome it is!" exclaimed Olive. "Only think what we missed by being absent from home at post time! And yet," she added, "I dare say there is nothing in it; only a few lines, written in his own straightforward fashion, to say that he had arrived 'all right,' and remained your 'affectionate son, Nigel Gresley.' Mamma, it is strange, yet true, that there is no one I ever met who expresses himself better, or more pleasantly and to the purpose, in society—indeed, it is impossible to have a more interesting companion at any time than my brother Nigel—but he never finds a

subject to write about. His letters are generally disappointing, to say the very least."

"You will scarcely call this one so," remarked Linda, quietly, "since it assures you of his safety."

"I certainly am glad of that," replied Olive, as she took Mrs. Gresley's treasured letter, and opened it lovingly; "but only one page after all these weeks! Just listen to this:—

"'Havana.

"'MY DEAR MOTHER,

"'You will be glad to hear of my safe arrival in Cuba, after a rough (and to many, alarming) passage. I shall remain here three weeks, and then, by sailing vessel, cross the Gulf of Mexico to Matamoras, on the Rio Grande. I am not much in the way of writing long letters ("certainly not," remarked Olive, *sotto voce*), but even if I were I should have no time to do so, and you must be content with this notice that I am 'all right.' I shall look out for one of Olive's documents shortly, and a line from yourself will be as welcome as ever to your affectionate son,

"'NIGEL GRESLEY.'

"Not a word about the voyage," said fault-finding Olive, as she folded the short well-written

page. "The people he met, and the various scenes he must have witnessed, are nothing to him; he has passed through them on to his own purpose, indifferent as ever to all that does not concern it."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Gresley, "you may be very thankful that your brother Nigel possesses that rare gift you have been describing, a steadfast purpose. It is impossible to prize his character too highly: 'dependableness' is written upon it; and I would rather have ten words from him than twenty more amusing but meaningless pages."

"Mamma," said Olive, "my good brother is worthy of all honour; his actions always speak for themselves. My attack is simply directed to his letters; for instance, if we did not know him, how could we possibly understand and appreciate him by such a brief account of himself as this? Linda, you profess to think that an ordinary unstudied letter tells great things; read this, and give me your opinion."

Linda took it quietly from its envelope to read and study its characters by the glancing firelight, then slowly replacing it, she replied: "I think the letter is very like the writer. The writ-

ing has an especial style of its own, and so has my cousin Nigel: the short, clear sentences bespeak energy and decision of character. I read determination and a strong will in the firm, direct down-strokes. He is cool and self-possessed, as you may judge by the quiet allusion he makes to the rough voyage and the evident alarm around him; but he is reserved, and does not care to speak of those whom he has not associated with further than as mere fellow-passengers. As to his kindness, Olive, I cannot judge by his letter to my aunt: I know it so well by all he has done for me, and his unselfish care for my interests."

"A very good description of my excellent brother," said Olive; "I think I ought to write it down for Margaret Winstanley."

"No doubt," said Linda, "she has formed her own opinion of him, and would not thank you for mine. Come, Olive, if we are to finish our home decorations to-night we must waste no more precious time. I shall begin by putting some of this bright holly on the painting of Conniston Crag, and I have kept some long wreaths of hop-blossom for the open frame-work of the pier-glasses: holly and gilding do not agree."

The work of ornamentation being completed there, the two girls flitted off into the library to touch up the rector's book-shelves and dark-framed pictures with "verdure," as the country newspapers call it. And then they sat down by the fireside, for the more dainty task of threading a basket full of gathered holly and other berries to festoon the chandeliers and lamps.

"How delightful it would be if some one would come and read to us; I am half tired already of telling my beads in this fashion," said Olive at length, as she tied a coral string of the berries round her neck, and then rose to admire its effect in the glass.

"What book would suit your fancy this evening?" asked Linda. "I should find it difficult to suggest one."

"Something in the style of the 'Golden Legend,' or even the 'Spanish Student,' which I have begun to read twenty times and never finished. I could easily find a book that would answer to my mood, if there were but a reader. But work seems to be the order of the evening, Linda, and if I am to go on threading these berries by the yard, I must put that blind down

and shut out the moonlight, it is so lovely, and my admiration tends to idleness.

"'Ah, thou moon that shinest
Argent clear above,
All night long enlighten——'

I forget what, or who," said lazy Olive, as she seated herself in a comfortable arm-chair, at a distance from Linda's busy fingers and the work-table; "something, of course, that brings in the suggestive rhyme of 'love.' Let me see, it is in the 'Spanish Student,' and that reminds me to find the book: it is sure to be on this shelf among my uncle's favourites. Yes, here it is; and I will describe a scene that I had with Nigel, in my last attempt to read Act III. We were staying at Winstanley Hall, and a delightful autumn afternoon had tempted Margie and myself to take our work into the garden, with the determination to finish the play. We had hardly begun the third act before we were interrupted by my unwelcome brother, with an alarming-looking gun over his shoulder, followed by Marcus. You know every idea of Nigel's is downright prose. He glanced at my book, and quietly sat down. '*Poetry!*' was the single word he uttered; but he could not more plainly have expressed how utterly he despised it.

"'If you intend to stay here,' I said to him, 'you must first carry off your gun to other quarters; Margie and I cannot endure the very sight of one. After that we shall expect you to read to us.'

"He looked up at Margie. 'It is not loaded, I assure you; but perhaps that makes no difference, and you will be more satisfied if I carry the "dangerous weapon" off to the gun-room.'

"Presently he sat down again, and I offered him the book. 'This is our next request, Nigel; we choose you our reader.'

"'I am not going to read any poetical rubbish,' he said; 'so do not suppose it.'

"'Not even if Margie asks you?'

"'Not even if Miss Winstanley desires it. In the first place, the "Spanish Student" is not in my "line," and I could not give proper effect to his sentiments; and, in the second, I came here to consult with you about a letter I had this morning from Bayley respecting my plan for the new cottages at Rock Ferry. I should like to hear Miss Winstanley's opinion of my sketch, if she will favour me with it.'

"He took some papers from his coat pocket and untied them; but I was not in the mood to be

amiable, and replied, 'We can attend to business matters in the morning; meanwhile, if you do not choose to be obliging, I shall go on with the book where I left off. We have always been prevented from finishing the "Spanish Student," and now we are determined to do so.'

"Nigel's good-humour was provoking. He replaced the plans and sketches, and, with his hands in his pockets, leant back, pretending to listen attentively. I began to read."

"It was 'prose' *versus* 'poetry' that afternoon, I suppose?" remarked Linda.

"Exactly so," said Olive; "and I am afraid the former gained the day. At last I said, in despair, 'I do not care, Nigel, you may say what pleases you; for if you deem us all to be utterly heartless, I can afford to pity you.'

"'You need not waste your words,' said Nigel, mischievously; 'I am simply practical, and, having a firm belief in *one*, my contentment is complete.'

"I guessed whom he meant, and Margie also, for she said, 'Mr. Gresley, I am quite sure that Olive's pity is unnecessary, and that the one you trust to will not send you, like poor Victorian, to "sink into the weltering sea, helpless and hopeless."'

"Nigel started up. 'These poetical similes are overwhelming,' he said. 'The last line of that scene alone applies to us, "Come, let us hasten on" (*exeunt*).'"

Linda laid down her leaf-work for a moment; it was a white holly cross, to be placed, when Christmas morning came, upon the granite altar tomb, near the chancel. "Was that all he said, Olive?" she asked.

"All what? Yes, all that Nigel said at that time. He is so reserved, it was a great confession for him to make that there was one he cared for and believed in. I dare say, if the truth were known, Margie Winstanley knows more about his opinions and fancies than you and I do, or ever shall. One thing is certain, she never will discover a trace of romance in him, and as to music, did you ever hear him sing?"

No, Linda confessed she had not, except in the Church service. "But he seemed fond of it when I played and sang to him—at least I thought so," she added, doubtfully.

"Quite a mistake, my dear Linda. He does not distinguish between the National Anthem and the Hundredth Psalm. Indeed, he cannot even appreciate Margie's singing, which is magnificent.

You must recollect that Nigel is altogether practical in his fancies, and that he finds more to interest him in the *Times* newspaper, and Bayley's list of rental and repairs, than in the most lovely music. In fact, he is the direct opposite, in every respect, to the clergyman I once described to you as your future."

"Pray leave my future alone, even as I do," interrupted Linda, rather testily. "Surely it is enough for you to attend to yourself; besides," she added, with a quickly-recovered smile, "if you say much more, you will make me angry, and this is Christmas eve. We must not forget the children's carol already, or the echoing change of the bells—'Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace.'"

CHAPTER VII.

"A MERRY CHRISTMAS."

"The merry note, so sweet to some, falls on another ear in pain;
'Tis thus that oft-remembered song I would not, dare not hear again."
E. M. L.

THE snowy field path to Hazelmere Church was soon a well-trodden roadway, for none of the parishioners of Hazelmere or its three sister hamlets would have missed the morning service, or the first glimpse of the brightly decked church upon Christmas day, unless a real hindrance had presented itself. Among the groups thus on their way, it was pleasant to hear the kindly repetition of the good old English greeting, "A merry Christmas to you!" answered by, "The like to you!"

Linda Conway heard the welcome password with a smile; but the cheerful wish roused only a dreamy echo of its glad meaning. Presently she seemed to grow conscious of this, and almost started

as old Godfrey Norman repeated the well-known words, and added, "God bless you, Miss Linda, and send you many of them."

Hastening quickly on, she spoke half aloud in her earnestness. "This will not do! What has become of the firm resolution I made last night? Useless and broken already! so that even the dear old phrase 'A merry Christmas' has given me pain. I will stay here and read it once more to some purpose."

She had reached the stone bridge which crossed the shallow mill-brook, rapid and noisy enough on a summer's day, but still and ice-bound now, its waving sedges and bordering rush-beds like a well-ordered company of soldiers standing at arms, with nodding plumes and silver trappings. In any other mood Linda Conway would have lingered to enjoy the full measure of such glittering beauty; now she passed it by unnoticed, and only stayed there under its sheltering willows to take a folded paper from her note-book, and read it thoughtfully. The lines were thus headed:—

"THE PRISONED HEART.

"Let me but speak this once my love for thee,
Only one moment I would dare be free!
These captive thoughts, this fettered will are strong,
And they would break the chain they've worn so long.

Wearied and sad with ever-felt restrain ,
This heart could almost die—the spirit faint.
Will none give answer still, nor set my fancy free ?
Must it dwell evermore in this captivity ?

"Listen again ! the freedom I implore
Is not for years or life ; it is no more
Than, with a joy too great to be expressed,
To turn my thoughts to thee, and be at rest ;
No more than for a wounded bird to fly
To its dear nest in the dark pine and die.
No more than this—no more—then set my fancy free,
Nor let it ever stay in this captivity !

"Still must it be ? Then let my rebel will
Bend to the pow'r that whispers, 'Peace, be still !'
So shall all trust, and hope, and comfort stay,
Though thy dear love be taken quite away ;
So shall my heart to God alone be given,
And all disquietude far hence be driven.
No more than this I ask—to set my spirit free,
And bring each wayward thought into captivity."

Linda read this to the end, and then, resting it on the low wall of the bridge, wrote, underneath the last line, "Evalinda Conway's resolution. Signed, Christmas morning, 1863."

The bell warned her not to linger more, and hastening on, she reached the church as the last chime began, in time to lay the white holly cross upon her mother's cared-for grave, and then to meet Mrs. Gresley and Olive as they drove up to the old lych-gate.

When the cheerful service was over, Linda proposed that, instead of returning home immediately,

Olive should be her companion in a walk to Farheath Edge, to convey some good wishes, and, what would perhaps be more valued, a packet of tea to Rina Cliffe.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Olive. "The idea of crossing the common in a snow like this! The track is beaten, you say; all the more likely to be slippery. I should have thought Rina's own fate would have been a warning to you."

"I must try to enjoy my own society, then," said Linda, with an amused look at Olive, as she took her place in the carriage; "but I cannot allow you to drive off with my precious packet of tea, or I may despair of a welcome from Mrs. Cliffe."

"I do not see why you should give that cross-grained parishioner the double benefit of the tea and your society when you are in such request elsewhere. On Christmas day too! I should have thought you would avoid going to a place where 'peace and goodwill' are unknown."

"Oh, I hope poor Rina's home is not so utterly deserted by the good angels as that, Olive. I sometimes find her in so happy a mood, I could almost fancy she had been listening to one of them; and if I am successful to-day in banishing

the subject of Owen's 'transportation,' and the unwelcome name of 'Lisbeth, my visit there will be both peaceful and pleasant."

"I see you are determined to risk your enjoyment of the day," said Olive, as she unwillingly gave the required basket into Linda's hand. "I had no idea such daintily-woven fancy work could belong to a sister of mercy, or I should have felt it my duty to leave it at home. Plain wicker-work, a kind of small market-basket, would have been more in character with your mission."

"I dare say its contents are suitable, at all events," said Mrs. Gresley; "may we examine?—tea, sugar, some excellent cake; and what is this?" she asked, as she quietly slipped half-a-crown into the basket.

"Only a fancy of Rina's," replied Linda, with a smile; "each of the old women in Farheath are supplied with such a gift as you see here on Christmas day from my father; the smaller packet is an addition of my own. Rina Cliffe has a strong mind, but she has a weak point even in that, which I have lately discovered—she values Scotch snuff beyond all luxuries."

By the time Linda Conway reached the cottage on Farheath Edge, the walk in the keen air had

brought back a bright colour to her face, and a wiser and more earnest purpose had guided her thoughts into that useful and practical channel for happiness—the duties of everyday life, and the real pleasure to be found in them. The service in the old church had been an inspiriting and refreshing one to her; and thus, even before she had answered Rina Cliffe's welcome, "Come in, Miss Linda," her inmost heart had settled the question which had caused such disquiet, and assured her it was best to accept life just as it had been so plainly ordered—its daily routine of work, and even its farewell to the bright glimpse of that future she had once ventured to hope might be hers. And, strong in other strength than her own, Linda felt she could be happy still.

"I am right glad to see you, Miss Linda," said Rina Cliffe, in anything but the weakened tone of an invalid. "I can wish you a merry Christmas, for you look as bright as the morning; but as to myself, I shall have but a sorry time of it. Old Norman was here just now; he brought me some berried holly to stick in my window and make it look a bit seasonable. 'A merry Christmas to you, missis,' said he. 'The like to you, Master Norman; but I should be fain to know how you think

I am to get it?' I asked; 'for here I lie hour after hour, and though I could work with a good will already, I cannot stir; excepting this right arm, I am as helpless as a child.' 'You may be glad at heart, missis,' he said; but dear o' me, Miss Linda, how 's any one to feel glad tied hand and foot like this?"

Rina's bed had been brought down-stairs and placed as near the chimney-corner as was convenient, partly for the sake of its warm position, and partly that she might continue her trade with the baker; but more especially, had she confessed the true reason, to keep watch and ward over Joan Price, who, strange to say, was seated as housekeeper and nurse in the chimney-corner. Yes, there was the small bent figure, to Linda Conway's surprise, occupying Rina's own arm-chair, as she sat with busy fingers washing and paring some white turnips, and gradually adding them to the savoury mess in the steaming black kettle over the fire.

The secret of the excellent dinner in prospect, Rina Cliffe honestly enough declared, was a present of Christmas beef from Squire Hardie himself. And a greater kindness than this she also confessed he had shown her; for when the news reached

him of her loss and accident, he, the enemy to her peace, who had helped Owen Cliffe in his undutiful emigration, had ridden over to Farheath and brought her a stamped receipt for the rent; "Just the same as if I had paid the money," said Rina.

"That was very kind, and very like our good Squire," remarked Linda, quietly.

"Ah, well, I can't say; but it wasn't like Mrs. Hardie to wrap two half-crowns up in it. No, I never knew that happen before, and I don't know what to make of it all," she added, in a sharp tone. "I can tell you this, Miss Linda, my temper wouldn't have taken it a while ago, but I'm struck down, and I lie here and think and say to myself, 'Well, it's a strange thing to have happened; and I can't make out the whys and the wherefores.'"

"You will do so very clearly, I hope, some day," said Linda; "it is difficult to believe that such a trial as this may after all be a great blessing. One good thing I am glad to see it has already accomplished—a reconciliation between you and Joan Price."

"Oh," said Rina, gruffly, "there was no one else at Farheath could spare the time, and she is not here out of friendly feeling. I wasn't going to

be beholden to her. No; Joan is come to work out that old score on the clock. When she goes home on a Saturday night I take this stick and rub out a chalk mark or two that stand against her. Wait a while, Miss Linda, till those crosses and strokes are all gone, and see if Joan Price ever comes near me. Not she! Times are altered since I was young; no one can do a kind action now-a-days without being paid for it."

"No one, Rina—that is a hard saying; I hope it is not true. Indeed it is not. Look at the good Christmas dinner which Joan is cooking there over the fire."

"That 's nothing," said ungrateful Rina. "The Squire will never have a worse dinner himself for that bit of a gift. What I mean is, that there are no good neighbourly ways amongst us. Many a time my mother has put out the fire and locked us in the house while she walked to Hayford and back to fetch a neighbour's medicine, or sat up at night after a hard day's work to do a good turn she never expected to be paid for. There was one poor helpless creature she walked half-a-mile to attend to every day till she died; I don't know that she ever got more than 'God bless you' for it!"

Joan Price shook her head. "Your mother didn't expect to receive kindness and give none in return. She was a kindly, godly woman; and if you had been like her, Rina Cliffe, this house would not have held your friends."

Linda Conway was accustomed to hear plain speaking among the poor, who have a standard of their own as to what may be rightly considered a personal affront, and she was not surprised that Joan's words were received with indifference; they had not touched that key-note to all quarrels —jealousy; and the accusation was not unfounded.

"Ah, yes, I always had a temper, and I reckon I always shall," replied Rina Cliffe, coolly; "my mother couldn't beat it out of me, so she gave up trying at last, and said she'd leave it to Providence. But, as I was saying, times are changed since my mother was alive. Maybe the new poor laws have had something to do with it, for now the sick and infirm are carried off to the workhouse, and if they cling to their homes and their own bits of furniture it's of no use; sure as ever they get helpless their neighbours tire of them, and are the first to cry out, 'Take them to the workhouse.' It's bad when it comes to this, Miss

Linda, that the relieving officer is sent for to take off the old folks, father and mother, as if they were a good riddance; but I've seen it."

"And so have I," responded Joan from the chimney-corner; "and yet there 's that fifth commandment plain enough to be heard and seen every Sunday. That was the first law, and I think the poor laws might have been made to fit into it a little better. Whether workhouses so do it would need a parson to say, but I never think myself they rightly agree."

"It 's my opinion," said Rina Cliffe, "that the great room at the 'Union' where they put the old folks—forty or fifty of 'em—with the staring windows nobody can look through, and the great fire that nobody can bear to sit nigh, shortens many a life. There 's nothing like what old folks are used to: a dark old chimney-corner, and a bit of fire low down, that they can look into and think over, that 's what suits old eyes. Look at those black links, Miss Linda, from the iron bar across the chimney; I should be lost without them and the kettle; I shouldn't know where I was in my reckonings."

Linda smiled. "They are 'links of memory's pleasant chain,' are they, Rina? Well, I hope

you will never lose your old associations. It is a comfort to think there are few of our old neighbours in Hazelmere who have had to do so, and exchange their dear home-life for the large room at Hayford Union."

As she spoke, more than one pleasant scene pictured itself to her mind: there was the old gardener sitting under the warm south wall of his daughter's cottage at Woodley, leaning on his two sticks, and half thinking, half dreaming away the hours; while she—the busy slave to her well-ordered house—scolded Johnny for certain dirty footmarks on the white stone floor. "You never say a word to granddad," says Johnny, in defence, "and he doesn't wipe his shoes or his crutches." "Grandfather likes to go in and out to enjoy the sunshine, and it does him good, child; besides, we shan't see his footsteps much longer, and I know what little boy will grieve over that."

Then there was Sarah Smith's cheerful face beside the arm-chair, so willingly given up to "poor, feeble mother" by her son, and placed in the warmest corner. "Mother can always hear me speak," Sarah proudly says, "let her be ever so deaf to any one else; and she 's as happy as a queen if she can but look at me while I 'm busy at work."

Yes, and many another proof of dutiful regard suggested itself to Linda Conway as she added, "You must not condemn all for the fault of some, Rina. Thank God, there is a great deal of kindness in Hazelmere still!"

"Maybe," replied Rina; "but I don't know where to look for it. My grandson has left me to take care of myself, or go to the workhouse, and——"

Linda hastily changed the dangerous subject. "You were telling me," she said, "about your mother's great consideration for her poor neighbours, Rina. Was she one of the old-fashioned, clever nurses, who are so much needed in our day?"

"The old rector's wife, Mrs. Oakley, used to say she was the best nurse in the county," replied Rina; "and that she had more faith in her herb-teas than in all the doctors' stuff in England. Mother went out regularly as the right season came to gather agrimony and henbane and a score of names; she sorted them carefully and dried them under the thatch, and made good use of all 'fore the year was out."

"Did she ever make any wonderful cures, Rina?"

"That she did, Miss Linda, sure enough. I remember many a one. There was one of my playfellows, Rose Knight, she was the last of five who'd all died of decline, and she had such a bright colour that the old rector always called her 'Rosy Morn.' But she fell ill at last. The doctor just looked at her, and said, 'Ah, poor thing, she is going after her sisters! I can do nothing to hinder it.' 'Well then,' said Mrs. Oakley, 'if that is so, take little Rosy to Verina Brian, and we'll try what herbs can do.' My mother sent me to the woods for some wild raspberry leaves and yarrow, and to a field three miles off for sanctuary, then she brought some wormwood, camomile, black-currant leaves, and horehound from the garden, and put a han'ful of each to simmer, along with a little oak bark. When two gallons of the tea had sunk to one, she strained and sweetened it with some honey and half-a-pound of sugar, and when it was cold stirred in a pint of old rum. Rosy took a wineglass full of this three times a-day; and before we'd begun to store up garden roots for winter, I saw her running up the hill beyond the Rectory with Mrs. Oakley's market-basket. Ah! that was something like a cure, I reckon, Miss Linda."

"Indeed it was. Have you the famous receipt still?" asked Linda.

"To be sure I have," replied Rina; "it's safe enough in that old china teapot on the shelf, where mother left it. I never made much use of it, for I couldn't be at the trouble to gather herbs for the parish; besides, the day is 'most gone by when they were trusted to and reckoned the finest medicine. Mrs. Oakley asked mother one day why she always used honey in her herb-tea. 'Because, Madam,' she said, 'the bees have more sense than the best of us, and if I haven't hit upon the right herb, they're pretty nigh sure to have got it.'"

"Do you remember Mrs. Oakley, Rina? I have understood she was quite a benefactor to Hazelmere. What was she like?"

"She was like no one else that I ever saw, ma'am: a very little lady, with sharp features and light hair; she had as stout a will as—mine, I was going to say—but, bless you, my spirit was nothing to hers. Once she said anything, it must be done, there was no gainsaying it. She kept all the girls in the parish under awe of her. I remember her now, in a stiff black satin dress and white muslin shawl, looking over my shoulder, as I sat

knitting a grey sock for my brother, till I got nervous like at being watched, and dropped a stitch; all in a minute I got as sharp a box on the ear for it from those small white hands of hers as ever I had from my father. It was the same if we came to school with a pinafore not just to her liking, or made a mistake in the Church Catechism. But Mrs. Oakley was more particular about our spinning than anything else, for she was proud of her own work at the wheel; she would slide her little fingers down our thread like lightning, and we all knew what we should get if she found it a bit rough or uneven."

"Ah, yes!" said Linda, "some of the beautiful work of the old rector's wife is likely to be long preserved in Hazelmere, for the fair white linen cloth for the Holy Communion belonging to our church is her gift. It was entirely spun by her own hands. The date and inscription are woven in the border: 'Elizabeth Oakley, her work and gift, Easter, 1793.' I suppose," remarked Linda, "that, notwithstanding the strict discipline of Mrs. Oakley's school, it was much valued by her scholars. I believe it was intended to fit them for service, and secured both a good situation and a supply of clothing for it."

"I reckon it was more for the sake of helping Mrs. Peterson, a poor lone creature who had lost 'most all her friends," replied Rina; "she was paid as much by Mrs. Oakley for teaching twelve girls as if there'd been a hundred. But she was mighty particular what was taught; writing wasn't so much as spoken of, and I think if we'd been seen with a slate and pencil we should have stood a chance of being dismissed the school. I did hear our schoolmistress say something about it once, and Mrs. Oakley spoke up quite sharp: 'What did girls want to write for?' she said; it was no good, she was sure, for them to be able to write home, and make complaints of their masters and mistresses, and get unsettled."

"It was an old-fashioned notion in those days that education was out of place for village girls," remarked Linda; "the good lady would be shocked if she could see the kind of teaching given in our National Schools now. But indeed there are several of our farmers' wives who talk just as she did about the mistake it is to over-educate the poor; they forget that the children never stay long enough to learn too much. Why, Rina, they leave school for work or service as early as ten or twelve years of age, and if their minds were not brightened

up by a few ideas gained rapidly in the stirring class system, they never more would have the chance. I dare say you would have found it useful if you had known how to keep your reckonings on paper instead of chalking them on the old clock."

"Ah, that I should, Miss Linda; but it was the old plan to keep us ignorant. It wouldn't do in these days to have such a slow way of teaching as Mrs. Peterson's. I was at her school three years, and not a stupid scholar either, but I'd only just begun three-part words when I left for service. It was my own fault that I soon forgot what little I did know; yet it wasn't surprising that I was more ready to sleep than look at my book when night came at Woodley Farm, for I'd a hard time of it there.

"Miss Linda," said Rina Cliffe, with a grim smile, "I'll tell you the last lesson I learnt at Mrs. Peterson's; it led to my leaving the school, so I'm not likely to forget it. Mrs. Oakley came in just as I was saying it. She called me out of the class into the middle of the room, and I began to spell the word again as she told me. A, b, ab, s, o, so, abso; l, u, t, e, lute, absolute. I made no mistake, but before I could turn to the next word, she'd taken the book out of my hands,

and knocked my head with it—this side and that —till my temper was up, and I said, like a fury, 'Thank ye, ma'am, I've had enough of you and your school; I won't come here again. No! I'll tell my mother you beat me for nothing. I'll go now, I will!'

"I struggled to get away, but it was of no use. 'You've not been corrected for nothing, you naughty girl,' said Mrs. Oakley; 'you made no curtsey when I came in, and you've curled your hair to make yourself smarter than the other girls. For shame, Rina Brian! this is not the kind of manner and temper you came here to learn.' She put my hair straight behind my ears, and then called Mrs. Peterson to bring the scissors. We had a fine scene, for my temper was well up, but the little lady was master; and when the rest of the scholars were gone, I was left standing on a form in the middle of the room, to learn that text about being 'adorned with a meek and quiet spirit.'

"It got darker and darker, still there I stayed, tearing the book to pieces, and chafing myself like a wild bird in a cage; till at last mother came, crying, to the door, and when I heard her asking Mrs. Oakley's pardon for me, as if it had been

herself, I felt humbled, and said, 'Ma'am, I'll say the text and go home quiet, if you'll forgive me, for mother's sake.' We went back with Mrs. Oakley to the Rectory, and there we had our tea; then mother and she talked together a long time about me, and they settled it that I'd better go to Woodley Farm. I heard them say, 'She'll want the discipline of hard work.' 'Ah, that she will, poor child.'

"Mrs. Peterson always thought herself a wise woman," said Rina, "and now she's as careful to keep off the rheumatism and to hoard up her strength, as if Hazelmere couldn't do without her. My mother used to say Mrs. Oakley's life was worth two of hers, who was always ailing and complaining. I remember when we came home from the funeral she said, 'The best always go first,' and I knew she was thinking Mrs. Peterson could have been better spared; but I hadn't quite got over my last lesson from Mrs. Oakley, and I said, quite sharply, 'If we have our faults, mother, she who is gone had hers.'

"'Ah, child,' said mother, 'you always fought hard for the last word, but you didn't get it with Mrs. Oakley. She wrote in the prayer-book I brought home for you yesterday a message you'll

think on: "Even a fool when he holdeth his peace is counted wise." That was her last word to you, and you 'll never be able to answer it.'

"'I don't reckon it was kind of her to put that in my book,' I said, 'and I 'm 'most ready to tear the page out. What 'll Geoffrey Cliffe say when he sees it?'

"'Let it alone, child,' said mother, 'let it alone. We have laid the little lady in her narrow grave; but depend upon it she 'd a great and kind heart. Take her as a pattern—for well you may—and mind how she always said to you, "Little Rina, you 've an honest face but a black temper; take care it doesn't leave its mark on you for ever."'

"'She needn't have minded my temper, mother,' I said, with a toss of my head, 'she 'd one of her own to look after. If I 've got a spirit, I shall live to want it.'

"'Well, well,' mother said, 'when that time comes you 'll find that it 's like the blazing fire, "A good servant, but a bad master." Keep it under now, child, or it will get the better of you. Our dear Mrs. Oakley had a high spirit, true enough, but she never boasted of it; nay, she made me repeat this sentence twice over in the last prayer I read to her—"Not according to my de-

subject to write about. His letters are generally disappointing, to say the very least."

"You will scarcely call this one so," remarked Linda, quietly, "since it assures you of his safety."

"I certainly am glad of that," replied Olive, as she took Mrs. Gresley's treasured letter, and opened it lovingly; "but only one page after all these weeks! Just listen to this:—

"'Havana.

"'MY DEAR MOTHER,

"'You will be glad to hear of my safe arrival in Cuba, after a rough (and to many, alarming) passage. I shall remain here three weeks, and then, by sailing vessel, cross the Gulf of Mexico to Matamoras, on the Rio Grande. I am not much in the way of writing long letters ("certainly not," remarked Olive, *sotto voce*), but even if I were I should have no time to do so, and you must be content with this notice that I am 'all right.' I shall look out for one of Olive's documents shortly, and a line from yourself will be as welcome as ever to your affectionate son,

"'NIGEL GRESLEY.'

"Not a word about the voyage," said fault-finding Olive, as she folded the short well-written

page. "The people he met, and the various scenes he must have witnessed, are nothing to him; he has passed through them on to his own purpose, indifferent as ever to all that does not concern it."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Gresley, "you may be very thankful that your brother Nigel possesses that rare gift you have been describing, a steadfast purpose. It is impossible to prize his character too highly: 'dependableness' is written upon it; and I would rather have ten words from him than twenty more amusing but meaningless pages."

"Mamma," said Olive, "my good brother is worthy of all honour; his actions always speak for themselves. My attack is simply directed to his letters; for instance, if we did not know him, how could we possibly understand and appreciate him by such a brief account of himself as this? Linda, you profess to think that an ordinary unstudied letter tells great things; read this, and give me your opinion."

Linda took it quietly from its envelope to read and study its characters by the gaining light, then slowly replacing it, she replied: "I think the letter is very like the writer. The wri-

servings, but according to my need, be merciful, O gracious Lord."'

"Miss Linda, I took my own way, and little heeded mother's advice; so my temper soon got to be my master, and like enough it is to keep so, I'm afraid, still. As I lie here, not able to stir, I've time given me to think about it all. Sometimes the pain hinders me; but when I'm easier, you 'd be surprised how often my thoughts go back to the old school-room, and I seem to hear Mrs. Oakley talking to me as she used to do, and I wish I hadn't torn that text out of my book, 'Even a fool when he holdeth his peace is counted wise.'

"Not too late to mind it now, did you say, Miss Linda? Ah, well, I hope it isn't. And now let 's have the first of St. Matthew, and don't you miss the 'generations.' I like to hear them; they bring it in from Abraham to Joseph so true. You can read about the Star in the East after, if you 're not tired. Dear me! I should have had nothing of a Christmas if you hadn't come in."

As Linda left the cottage Joan Price followed her out, and carefully closed the door behind her. "If you please, Miss Linda," she said timidly, "I want to speak a word to you. I've got a heavy trouble on my mind, and I can't trust to any one

but you; I can get no rest day nor night," sobbed Joan, "for thinking of it."

"What is it, Joan? I will help you if I can," said Linda, kindly.

"I don't know what it is, Miss Linda; but I'm afraid to speak lest Martin should get into trouble. You wondered to see me here; but you won't wonder when you've looked at this letter, if you take it to mean the same as I think."

Linda read:—

"DEAR MOTHER,

"I hope this finds you well, as it leaves me, but very unhappy. I'll tell you the truth, and then you'll know the worst, and you must forgive me. I'm not working on the new line, as you think—I'm off from Plymouth this day on board the Eryx; and it's the best thing that could happen, for I got acquainted with some fellows on the line that would have done me no good, and when I meant nothing but a bit of mischief, they turned the joke into wicked earnest. It's nothing but what I shall make amends for some day, you may be sure of that. They say I'm put more for'ard in my place as cabin-boy than many a lad that's been in the service a year.

And after a while I shall save some money, you 'll see. I hope Rina wasn't much hurt. You must wait on her, mother, and keep the black donkey out of her garden. The palings in the corner want mending; I broke them down on purpose, but I 'm sorry for it now. I 've got Miss Linda's books that she gave me, and I read 'em. So no more at present from your affectionate son,

"MARTIN PRICE."

"I think I can guess your fears," said Linda, gravely. "Did Martin know where Rina kept her money?"

"That 's just what I can't say, Miss Linda; but it 's likely enough he spied it out through the window. I 'll never believe but it was meant to be a trick, and the money put back again. Two others went off besides Martin as soon as it got reported Rina Cliffe had been found lying dead by the footpath. O dear! what shall I do? Rina was always wishing he might be sent to prison or transported, and now perhaps it will all happen."

"Never mind future troubles, Joan; you have enough to meet in the present. Come to the Rectory and consult with my father about Martin; he is a wiser counsellor than I know how to be."

CHAPTER VIII.

A SONG OF PEACE.

"Lift, oh lift, thou lowering sky;
Drifts of snow, pass quickly by;
Flitting leaves, chase gloom along;
Peace is coming—hear her song."

LINDA CONWAY'S visit to Mrs. Peterson was delayed for some months by a visit to Clevedon with her cousin Olive, while Mrs. Gresley remained to take as many household cares at the Rectory as Joyce Archer would hand over to her, and to rejoice in a peaceful quiet that suited well both her health and inclination. But at length the time came when she was recalled to the less inviting and busier scenes of her own home-life at Richmond Terrace; and the early summer, with its tempting meadows newly restored to their freshest green, found Linda once more alone in her old haunts; wandering by the dreamy Haze to gather the choice bouquet of river flowers with which it was her

delight to deck the old summer-house in the Rectory garden — tall purple loose-stripes and willow-herb, the rarely-found flowering rush, with its singular blue-pink tints, and almond-scented water-lilies, that could only be reached at some hazard from the tiny bays and inlets of the river.

In the village itself, as soon as the usual routine of everyday life began, Linda found many a glad welcome awaiting her. Rina Cliffe was still a prisoner to the old truckle-bed in the kitchen; a pair of crutches were laid up in the corner, but as yet no attempt had been made to use them, and Joan Price, who still remained in her old position as nurse and housekeeper, shook her head wisely as she looked at them, and said, "Ah, well, Miss Linda, there they are if we want to use them, but I don't expect we shall this side Christmas, if we ever do."

So Rina Cliffe had yet many a weary day in store for her to lie and think, as she said; but it seemed to Linda as if she had already thought to good purpose. It might be that, laid aside in that quiet room, free from all her hard strivings to live honestly and without parish aid, she had fewer temptations to call forth her sins of the tongue; still

there was an evident change for the better. The loud, rough voice had certainly softened in its tones, and a gentler spirit guided her words.

The rector, in his own kind manner, had talked much to her about her besetting sin, pointing out the urgent need to begin a holier life, if she desired to be found worthy of that world where no angry passions might enter, and she had listened with attention, only replying to him, in her usual blunt manner—

"All very true, sir, and I'm quite willing so to do if you will show me how to begin; but my temper runs off unawares, and I don't see how I'm to be even with it."

The first step to be taken was not told her in the rector's own words; he read to her from the highest authority this command, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil-speaking be put away from you, with all malice." And again, "Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face evermore."

Then, as from time to time Rina still listened and agreed, he put her to the test, asking her if she was ready to forgive, as she hoped to be forgiven, and willing to prove it by sending that long-desired message of love and recon-

ciliation to 'Lisbeth and Owen in their distant home.

There was a long silence, and the rector urged no reply. At length she said, "You've brought it right home, Mr. Conway, and I see no way out of it. I can freely forgive Owen, but it's 'Lisbeth that goes against my feelings. I have said she should never darken my doors, and I'm minded to say it still; but then, again, there's the child—they have called him Geoffrey, after his grandfather; and there's Mrs. Hardie, always pleading for 'Lisbeth whenever she comes, till I'm getting 'most used to the notion of her; and Miss Linda says that——"

"Ah, but there is another still stronger and more urgent voice, I hope," said the rector; "your own conscience, Rina."

"Well, well, so there is," she replied. "I don't say but what you're right, sir; still it's hard work to bring myself round to say I forgive her. I'm not certain sure that I do; but if you'd write her a line, and tell her what's happened, you might put it that I should feel more contented, as I lie here, for bygones to be bygones."

Thus, in quieter mood, Linda found the "cross" parishioner of Farheath; and as she

left the cottage after her first welcome visit, she recalled more than one hopeful sign of the change that had been at work in her absence. "There is an old saying that 'little straws show which way the wind blows,'" she said to herself, as she drove her grey pony merrily across the sunny common; "and it is surely an omen for good that Black Milly has left her retreat on the thatch to lie in secure comfort upon Rina's bed; also that sly Jacket flies in and out at his pleasure, no longer troubled by the rude alarms of her angry voice."

The cross-roads were no sooner reached, than Linda found Miss Tryphosa Mills as ready as ever to give her a series of welcoming nods over the muslin blind, while the small servant within assisted with all her powers in deciding the question of her destination; but whether it was to see the old gardener or Mrs. Peterson, or only to look at the haymakers from the hill, and smell the fresh-cut hay over the meadows, neither of them could declare. One thing was certain, she had a brown hat on, with a woodcock's wing on one side; "And," added Miss Mills, with emphasis, "if that's town fashion, give me country ways, and a real ostrich feather."

Miss Tryphosa Mills' Sunday bonnet was of

yellow Leghorn, and the long ostrich feather which encircled its ample crown was dyed the same bright tint, yellow horn-poppies clustered within, and golden strings, broad and glossy, completed the rare effect. These ribbons were lovingly rolled upon paper, and laid judiciously in a careful position on her return from evening service; but the last fond look and touch were always given to the pride of Miss Mills' heart—the real ostrich feather; and it was with a genuine sigh that she covered it from sight for the week, and came down to her little parlour to find the text, and hear Milly Smith her catechism.

CHAPTER IX.

ROBIN'S SONG OF WELCOME.

"The sailor lad, far out at sea, saw wondrous birds of every hue:
Vermilion, tinged with golden green, glancing to amethystine blue;
But as he left the fairy isle, he looked far on into the sky:
'These have no song,' he said, 'for me—they only glitter as they fly.
I'd give the world that I might hear, above the ripple of the foam,
The Robin's note, that sweetly sings no other song than Home, sweet Home!'"
E. M. L.

SEVERAL months passed on—as life in the country so often seems to do, without any striking event, yet full of busy occupation: very much like the soft flowing Haze, which took its even course through the village of Hazelmere as if it had nothing more to do than to reflect the fair picture of its pleasant banks, or sweep off a few dead reeds and grasses from its fairy islets of white "meadow sweet," where the hidden moor-hen had left them, yet, nevertheless, as full of purpose in its onward tide as when, with sudden turn, it hurried on to its work at the dripping mill-wheel; then further

still, to become the useful boundary line of a county; and yet on to busier life amongst the tall sparred masts, clustered in its broad, deep channel, ready to bear them far over the wide sea.

So Christmas-tide came peacefully in due season to Linda Conway, with its joyous music and sweet church bells. A year! it did not seem half so long since she had listened to the same sounds and returned, as of old, from the same employments to the quiet Rectory; above all, since she had written and signed that resolution to banish from her thoughts the regard which she treasured for another. A whole year had passed, but Linda had given herself work to do, and she had done it zealously—nothing great nor worthy of praise from others, still, work that had occupied her mind and strengthened her purpose; and now on this Christmas eve, as she came home wearied with the active business of church-decorating, the dreamy twilight and the low seat before the red embers on the hearth invited her to stay and rest for a while, and soon guided her meditations into a grave review of the past year—yes, indeed, a year!—and to ask herself how far her resolution had been kept. Well, indeed, for her if she could answer truly that it had.

But Linda's thoughtful mood was abruptly interrupted by the firm step in the hall, and the extremely substantial figure of Joyce Archer filling up the doorway. A pile of fir-wood was in her arms; presently this was laid upon the hearth and stirred into a blaze; Joyce placed a dazzling lamp upon the table, and began to remove the books and papers.

It was a fixed rule with Archer, that—whenever the rector had retreated into his study for the evening, with a command that he "was on no account to be disturbed," and she had to bring in a solitary tea-cup for her young mistress,—at least plenty of light and warmth and brightness should surround her; so now—noticing Linda's unusual silence—Joyce bustled out of the room, returning again with a fairer burden, and one she thought more likely to attract notice.

"See here, Miss Linda, did you ever have such a grand bough of mistletoe before, or such beautiful variegated holly? the berries are clustered as thick as an ear of corn. Squire Hardie sent them with his compliments; and Mrs. Hardie sent good wishes, and such a turkey! Shall I bring that in for you to see?—I should like you to look at it. Lift it you never could; but it 's a wonderful great beauty."

Linda roused herself from her dreamy look into the fire, and took up a choice spray of the holly with a sudden look of genuine pleasure. "How very kind of the Squire! This will just do for my work this evening: I like nothing so well as white-leaved holly for my dear mother's grave. I am so glad of it, Joyce; and Mrs. Hardie's Christmas gift deserves great thanks—perhaps I had better write to her at once."

"Bless you, Miss Linda, you needn't trouble. I was going into the village to take Miss Trissy Mills your Christmas present to her, and so I just went round by White Court and left the basket and your thanks. I told Mrs. Hardie you had been busy in the church all day, and I knew for certain you'd be too tired to write this evening. She gave me a very nice mince-pie, and I heard a good bit of news here and there; so what with one thing and another I had a pleasant walk."

"I am glad to hear it," said Linda; "how did you find Mrs. Hardie and—the dogs?"

"They're all going to Brighton for change of air," replied Joyce; "at least I know Skye is to go with her, for she said a salt-water bath might perhaps strengthen his leg, which had never been right since his accident."

Linda smiled. "Well, Joyce, we all have our fancies; perhaps Mrs. Hardie would be surprised at mine for the canaries and little 'Goldie.'"

"To be sure," said Archer, in her matter-of-fact way. "Now I like pets that are useful. A good speckled hen or two, like Bridget and Brownie, are worth all the Skye-terriers that ever barked themselves hoarse; besides, you can't treat them as if they were Christians: they've ways of their own, and they're good independent ways too."

"Perhaps so," said Linda, mischievously, "if you make ample allowance for their fractious disposition. Joyce, did you ever notice Dame Bridget's unwillingness to put down a choice morsel, even to enjoy it herself?"

"I don't know that I ever did, Miss Linda; but let me see, what was it I was just going to tell you? Oh, it was a bit of news I picked up at Miss Trissy Mills'. After I left White Court I got to the cross-roads in time for a good cup of tea with the old lady, and she'd plenty to say about everybody. We went over most of the parish. Well, now, it's about time to get tea ready I think; I leave you to guess what I heard—parish news, Miss Linda."

"It is impossible to do that," replied Linda,

with an amused smile. "I only hope it is something worthy of the cheerful Christmas time."

"Wait a bit," said Joyce, with a significant nod; "I'll be back *di*-rectly with the tray, and then you shall hear."

"Well, Joyce, what has Hazelmere been exciting itself about?"

Joyce Archer put down a tea-cup, and, standing very erect, placed her wide hand where her heart might be supposed to be found, and shook her head slowly. "Miss Percy has at last found a minister that speaks to her feelings. Mr. Southern has been calling upon her, and induced her to attend the 'specials' in the school-room at Hayford; and she told Miss Mills this morning that there was such a dear eloquent man there last night; he gave them an hour and a-half, and it seemed 'no time.' There had only been quite a 'dry stick' of a preacher before, but now it would be different, for Mr. Southern had complained to the secretary, and some stirring popular clergymen were to be sent down."

"That is nothing pleasant to listen to," remarked Linda. "It always grieves me to hear the merits of a clergyman discussed, as if he were ordained only to be an orator, rather than with

that simple requirement to preach the Holy Gospel. I don't undervalue the rare gifts of a beautiful voice and winning eloquence; but I think we who listen ought to say less than we do about the messenger, and attend more to the message, whether it is given us in the graceful language of one we love and respect, or in a less welcome manner."

"That was very much what Miss Trissy Mills told her; 'And, Miss Percy,' she said, 'you listen to me. I've lived to be one year off seventy, though I don't tell every one that, and I have always taken note of flashy preachments; they make a great sensation while the sudden light lasts, but they are apt to die out, and leave a black night behind them. Human nature can't keep up to that sort of thing; the "dry sticks," as you call them, make a cheerful, warm fire on the hearth, and give quite enough light to live by.'"

"Poor Miss Percy! So that was your bit of news," said Linda, as she took her place at her tea-table.

"No, that it wasn't, Miss Linda; my news has nothing to do with Mr. Southern, though I did hear that his daughter, Miss Caroline, is going to be married in a few weeks to the curate, who'd a

fortune left him by his aunt. Dear me! whatever was his name? He had very thin light hair, and wore spectacles."

Linda smiled as she suggested the name of Rev. Edwin Mitts.

"That was it, sure enough," said Joyce Archer. "Ah, well, my piece of news was not about him; but, Miss Linda, only think what a change there is! Owen Cliffe and 'Lisbeth have come home from Australia, and the old grandmother has made no disturbance, but given them both a right good welcome. I can hardly believe it, for I heard Rina say myself to Owen, 'You love the very ground that girl treads on as much as I hate it, and if I knew you would ever marry her, and I saw you drowning before my very eyes, I wouldn't so much as put out a hand to save you!' Her words were dreadful, Miss Linda, and it is a wonderful thing, to be sure, that she should take to 'Lisbeth like a daughter after all."

"Poor Rina! So she will really enjoy a merry Christmas. How glad I am. Joyce, I think Mr. Hardie has had something to do with this happy meeting; he has more than once given a significant hint about the probability of their return. He was very fond of Owen, and if he helped him in

the way I suspect, they have had no difficulty in finding a passage home."

"Very likely, Miss Linda, he is so kind-hearted and generous. It puts me in mind of rather a strange thing which happened last week. Mrs. Hardie told me that one day Rina Cliffe sent for the Squire in a great hurry. When he got there he found her 'all in daze,' as she called it; for Joan Price had been winding up the clock that morning, and just took down the old shoes to dust them. 'It was a mighty strange thing your losing that money out of here, Rina,' she said. 'Did you ever look if it had slipped into the lining?' Rina couldn't remember, but she took up the old list shoes and felt the inside carefully. Sure enough there were the three sovereigns in one, and the eighteenpence in the other!

"Squire said they hadn't fallen into that place, he was certain, and nothing would induce him to take the money. 'If you 'll let bygones be bygones, supposing Owen and 'Lisbeth ever come back,' he said, 'so will I. You 've got the receipt for your rent, and it 's all square and straightforward between us.' So Rina shook hands upon it, and she 's kept her word.

"Miss Mills says it 's drifted about that there

was a letter came from Martin Price lately, but Joan says nothing; any way, the money's come back——"

"And the lesson has been learnt that poôr Rina needed," said Linda. "We have also been taught, I hope, to see how much good may result from what seems the worst event in our lives. Well, Joyce, your news was really worth hearing; and now I must get tea over, and turn my attention to these evergreens. How glad I am about Rina Cliffe!"

Joyce Archer busied herself with the bright teapot and the kettle, staying to rub the slightest dimness off the shining surface with her apron, until she could no longer delay her other bit of news—the choice morsel kept for the last moment; and she laid a letter upon Linda's knee, as she said, "I came back by the village just in time for the evening post from Hayford." Then, with a contented look back towards her darling's happy face, Joyce left her to enjoy it.

The letter was from her cousin Olive Gresley, long, and closely written. It contained a scented case with some choice photographs; but it also enclosed one of her brother Nigel's letters to his distant home, as like himself as ever, Linda

thought, in its composition, and the easy flow of his idle pen. She looked at this first, and then read it more than once.

"Yes, it is just like him," Linda thought, as she laid the letter beside her, and turned to its perfect contrast—the long carelessly written lines of his sister Olive. It was a true specimen of an ordinary young lady's composition, nevertheless it had its interest and its news.

New thoughts for Linda now, as she folded the letter from her cousin, and laid the bright holly leaves before her to begin her work for Christmas eve; listening, as she did so, from time to time, to the sweet carol-singer beneath her window:

"Look now, for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing."

New thoughts for days to come! When the bright Christmas-tide was past, and the early spring came forth timidly in its first simple dress of faintest green, bordered with snowdrops and aconites; and when, later still, the soft dreamy air was filled with the scent of lilacs and syringas in the shrubbery, Linda Conway, staying there in the cool shade, would gather white lilies from

their dark leafy bed, and contrast them, as she did again and again, in their perfect beauty, with the studied dress and style and ornament which was now a part of Olive's letters. Her cousin's approaching marriage seemed to Linda to have more connection with millinery establishments, and the choice of colour and effect in every possible thing, than even with Mr. Winstanley himself; but then, as Olive said, it was to please dear Eustace that she took so much trouble about it,—he was so very particular in his fancies about her dress and appearance.

And now Linda's taste was in urgent request to help Olive in the all-important decision between "Honiton" and "Guipure," rich white silken brocade or "shimmering" satin, for the happy occasion when all these choice materials would be worn and criticised and finally described in the county newspaper was drawing near: and now also a crowded vessel was speeding on its way to the English shore with Olive's brother Nigel, who said little, yet cared much for his only sister's happiness, and had a word or two to say about it to the man who was to have the sacred charge committed to him.

Linda never forgot the visit to Richmond

Terrace. It was enough, she declared, to destroy the romance of a lifetime.

This she remarked to her father, as they drove together over Farheath Common, and stayed at the wicket gate, where Jacket was feathering himself with an unusually impudent air.

"If you will let us come in, old fellow, we will make a call upon your mistress this morning," said the rector.

Jacket turned his wise head on one side and considered that point; it seemed that, like his own plumage, there was always a dark and light view of a subject which required his attention. After due thought, and a survey of his visitors, he replied with decision, "Jacket's alive O!" and flew straight into the house to his old place on the settle.

"I don't know what that has to do with our visit," said Linda, laughing, "unless Jacket considers the call ought to be made upon himself. Papa, look before you; is not that a pleasant picture?"

Yes, there, in the open porch, Rina Cliffe herself was sitting quietly in the warm sunshine, and looking down with supreme content and amusement upon a tiny child at high play with Black Milly. Half pleased, half vexed, Milly was obliged

in self-defence to fancy herself young again, and bestir her idle paws to catch the tempting ball that touched her ears so merrily, and kept her from her morning's doze on the thyme-bed close by.

"Good morning, Rina; you see we are come at last," said Linda cheerfully. "We did not intend so long a time to have passed before coming to see you and your grandchildren; but the truth is, I have been to town for a few weeks, and this is my first drive out."

"That isn't news to me," replied Rina quickly; "I know when Miss Linda is at the Rectory as well as I know when the sun shines. Well, I'm fain to see you, and likewise Mr. Conway. Get up, Lizzie, and give me my stick out of the corner and the ball of worsted you've been playing with. Can't lift granny's stick, little woman? well then, give me one end of it. You see, sir, I can't move without this help yet awhile, but I shall be right glad when I can light the fire with it, and get to work again."

"I have no doubt you will," replied the rector; "yet I dare say you can look back to the trial of the past year, and acknowledge that there was a good lesson to be learnt from it."

"That I can," she answered, honestly; "I'm not

over careful yet what I say when my temper's up, but it don't get up as often as it used to, and I'm a world happier. I won't boast, for I've lived long enough to know nothing good comes of that; but I think," she said, slowly and thoughtfully, "that the temper which mastered me is more likely to be the servant. I pray every day of my life, 'Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil;' and I say the prayer you taught me, Miss Linda, 'Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.'"

The rector said a quiet "Amen," and turned away to speak to the little one at his feet. "Lizzie, child, go and call your mother," said Rina at length. "'Lisbeth, come here. I told this lady once you should never darken my door; now I tell her again what I feel, that it would be a dark day to me if you were to leave this house."

Elizabeth Cliffe's bright face looked brighter still as she made her curtsey in the doorway. Standing there in the sunshine, on the very threshold she had been angrily forbidden to cross, she looked winsome enough to have made her way to the heart of the hardest of grandmothers, as in truth she had done.

It was very out of place that at that moment

Jacket loudly called out, "What a frost it is!" as he flapped his wings and prepared himself for a flight into the corner, to rob Black Milly's saucer. It was a libel, for the warmth of Rina's heart was evident by the kindly expression of her hard-lined face; and the warmth of 'Lisbeth's feelings spoke perhaps even more, by the silent clasp in her hands; her eyes were glistening—they were happy tears.

It was much better timed, and altogether in pleasant agreement with everything, that the grandson, Owen Cliffe himself, should come in sight, whistling a merry tune as he crossed the field from the old corner piece by Mill Brook, browner by many shades for his stay in foreign parts, and carrying some heavy tools across his shoulder, as if they had been a feather.

Little Geoff—well on before—showed an early fancy for bird-nesting, and took a sharp survey of the hedges until his father came up. Geoff thought the English birds very ugly and brown: he liked the green and scarlet feathers, he said; there were no pretty colours to look at now.

"What do you call that, Geoff?" said his father, as they stopped at the last stile, and a saucy robin looked at them with his bright black eyes from the upper rail.

"Well, father," said Geoff, "that's something like red, but it isn't red, and he has only got a brown back after all; he wants some blue, and green, and yellow, and a top-knot."

"Ah, Geoff," said his father, "you're not an English boy yet; but whatever you think of Robin, I'm more glad to see him again than I can tell you. However, you must wait a bit, lad, and then I'll take you to the Hazel woods, and you shall hear how the English birds can sing; you'll forget all about red and blue feathers then. I wonder," he said to himself, "if the nightingales sing as they used to when 'Lisbeth and I stole off for our walk on a Sunday evening?"

Swinging open the garden gate, Owen and little Geoffrey were soon standing among that happy group in the cottage. The rector and Miss Linda had a hearty welcome ready for them, and there Owen met 'Lisbeth's glistening look and smile, and somehow he seemed to know all about it—an Englishman's heart has its own depth of content, and needs little outward expression. Few words were enough for Owen; he looked at his wife, and she read his happy thoughts as quickly and silently.

Then Lizzie left her grandmother's knee and flew into her father's arms, in less time than it

takes to write it; once there, she was the very fairy Content herself. Who can help rejoicing with them that do rejoice? The rector could not; and he felt yet more glad at heart when Rina Cliffe turned to his own beloved Linda, as they rose to leave, and said, "God bless you, Miss Conway! for this is a joyful day to me, and you began it. Yes, Owen and 'Lisbeth, I never listened to any one in the world as I have listened to her sweet voice; I don't know how it was, but she had a winsome way that I couldn't gainsay, and after awhile there was another voice (as the rector said), and my conscience would get a hearing. So I say again, God bless her and the happiness she has brought to this house!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SONG OF THE NEST IN THE HAZEL WOOD.

"So falling, like a gentle rain on winter flowers,
So resting, as a golden gleam on dark-felt hours,
One moment, listen! Wait—the song is still,
Again the merry note, close to the window-sill;
Open the casement wide, let the bright bird fly in,
Thus, welcome little guest, my very heart you win."

E. M. L.

How like this life of ours is to a solitary ship sailing over the warm seas from far-off coasts, until those sunny waves are dashed coldly back by northern tides! The near is all ocean, the far all haze; but at length the land-fog dissolves and disappears, and the clear outline of cliff and rampart rise in sudden beauty. Home is no longer a desire, a hope,—it is an actual presence: the haven is reached, the anchor holds fast, one step will place us on that happy shore, and once there, at home, that desolate sea has never more to be crossed. The wanderer shall go out no more for ever.

Nigel Gresley was nearing England, and in his own silent fashion—unexpressed by any outward sign—he rejoiced in the fact. As he stepped on shore—

> "His heart was thankful for the English tongue;
> For English sky, with feathery cloudlets spanned;
> For English hedge, with glistening dewdrops hung."

He felt all these delights and more, but he told it only in two words, sent by telegram from Dover:

"All right.—N. G."

Nigel was not long in following; and soon he was at home, or rather in the well-lighted hall at Richmond Terrace, further entrance being effectually prevented. The floor was blocked up in one direction by packing-cases of every size and description, and in another by various portmanteaus and travelling appliances; some had just arrived, and others stood in readiness to depart. Stevens, the steward, stood in the centre with a mighty pen in his hand, checking off the numbers on his list, and ordering the place for each with a simple wave of the hand.

Nigel stood in the doorway in silent dismay. He had certainly arrived home—there was no mistake as to that; indeed, Stevens met him at once to assure him of the fact.

"Come home, sir! Glad to see you, sir! Mrs. Gresley is in the drawing-room; several ladies with her. Allow me to take your coat and hat—and please to mind that upright case, it's Miss Winstanley's harp, sir. This is luggage just arrived; we are also sending Miss Gresley's things off to the station."

"I dare say," replied Nigel, absently. "Where is Miss Gresley? Did they not expect me this evening?"

"Oh, certainly, sir, by the 8.50; but on these busy occasions time slips away. Miss Gresley is in her room, engaged with Madame Etarde."

"Very well," said Nigel with a smile, "I will go up-stairs presently; meanwhile, bring me some dinner." As he spoke he opened the dining-room door. "I shall be at home here at all events, Stevens," he remarked. "Ah!——"

Would he? Alas, no! The long table was spread, but with no mortal food; it sparkled with shining silver, and glittered with radiant colours. It was a garden of fairest flowers and fruit, and on it a feast was spread for a fairy prince. But all this splendour lost itself in the grand centre—a cake, snow-covered, decked with frosted fancies, and crowned by a figure adorned in sugared lace, and

waving a bright motto, "Happiness to the happy." This was no resting-place for mortal man, it was a fairy palace; and with one glance at the woman busy garlanding with real flower-wreaths the well-known picture of his father in the old dining-room, he turned away.

"I shall dine in my own room, Stevens—the gun-room I mean—and don't let them be long about it, for——"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but Mr. Winstanley is in that room; some gentlemen on business are there with him. And—shall I say dinner in the breakfast-room, sir, if you will please to excuse a small table in the window? Miss Gresley's presents are laid out there for inspection."

Nigel's exclamation was not one of pleasure or patience; but he was obliged to yield to his fate in the matter of dinner, and left the hall by a wide staircase leading to the drawing-room. The echo of Miss Winstanley's last song reached him as he stood for a moment on the landing; but though a lively one, it had no effect in changing his present mood, or the curve of his singularly expressive mouth: "So merry and blythe our wedding shall be, sang the Syren to the Friar." But the listener heard it no longer, another sound had

caught his ear. He knew it well, and his face changed in a moment from its sternness. Linda Conway's light step was near him, and then her own words of welcome, simple and true as herself.

"Oh, my cousin Nigel! I have been listening for you this long time! How quietly you must have come in! Welcome home at last."

"So you are here among it all," he said, at length; "then there certainly will be some relief among all this finery. We shall have a real rose to contrast with these wretched imitations—quite true, Linda, and you are looking bright enough to claim the title. And now, little cousin, go and fetch Olive away from that milliner; I'll have no more nonsensical notions put into her head. Say that if she does not come at once, I shall seek her out and put my foot through that flimsy veil which she is no doubt trying on and arranging."

Nigel's voice had reached the drawing-room, and exclamations of "Is it? It is!" and "My dear Nigel!" united with the exclamations of Miss Winstanley and the bridesmaids, known and unknown to him, made up a chorus of sounds not to be equalled except on a like occasion.

"Glad to see you at home again," said the rector, in his old quiet manner, as he stood there

amongst them, looked up to by all in every sense of the word.

"You are very good," replied Nigel; "but how is one to feel at home in such a decorated house? I left my mother and sister in quiet possession of an ordinary English dwelling, and I find it inhabited by fairies in gauze and grenadine."

That evening, and the wedding-day itself, passed with Nigel Gresley as if a sort of extraordinary business had to be gone through; and he performed it as such in his usual prompt and decided manner, making himself as genial as he could, and wasting no more time than was strictly necessary. Linda was not placed near him at the long breakfast, and he had to return thanks for the bridesmaids, neither of which was according to his own desire or arrangement. But he met his fate in a kindly, matter-of-fact fashion, made the required speech in easy, proper language; and was as agreeable as might be to Miss Margie Winstanley, the fair lady appointed to him. This certainly was not the pleasant task it would have been if his little cousin Linda had been his companion; and he felt a strong inclination more than once to allow his own face to remain as unmoved as the features of his neighbour, so unvaryingly turned towards him;

but he resisted the mood for silence, only asking Linda afterwards whether they had not occasionally reminded her of a well-preserved William and Mary shilling, both as regarded position and animation.

It was utterly out of the question that among all the arrivals and departures—the confusion between order and disorder, business and pleasure—Nigel could feel himself at home for a single moment; indeed, he did not profess to enjoy his return as such, until one quiet evening soon after, when he found himself once more in the old Rectory at Hazelmere.

There, in the "great hall" where years ago Mrs. Oakley's hospitality was largely spread for all comers, her kindly spirit seemed to linger; and in spite of the change within, and even the colouring of the rector's well-filled book-shelves, dark with old oak panels and older volumes, the library, as it was now called, had a bright, homelike influence upon all who entered it. Nigel felt this at once with a strange relief as he took his favourite place again in the cushioned recess of the window, and looked from the comforts within to the pleasant country scenes without. The church meadow was before him, over which long

shadows fell from the lime-trees that guarded the lych-gate; Major was shaking his glossy mane and roamed at large to enjoy the first fresh grass of the "aftermath," or else to pull the new-made stack in the corner as far as he could or dare; beyond, stretching out for many a mile, lay the open Farheath Common, dotted with cottages and gardens and clustering sheep; while over all—still, homelike, and sweet—the new-made hay scented the air from Squire Hardie's meadows; and near him Linda's goldfinch sang joyfully to the birds in the shadowy elms. Nothing was changed in the summer life at Hazelmere: even the vagrant squirrel darted from the tall arbutus on the lawn, where his supper lay hidden, just to show he was there; and nearer still the white Banksia peeped in through the window, with its clustering roses nestling on the ledge, tempting him with their well-remembered fragrance to gather them once more.

But why say all this to prove Nigel Gresley was at home? for Linda herself was there, and she was the very source of happiness to him; all else would have been strange and lost without her presence among it. Yes, Nigel could rest at last. He could tell his adventures now with a contented smile that they were over; could make the rector's

dark face brighten and Linda's merry laugh reply; for he had a strange power of description—his words painted each scene to the life, and his colouring was none the less powerful that it was true to its lightest touch. Indeed it was no wonder that Nigel was a welcome guest at the Rectory, or that, once there, he was at home.

It was no wonder either that Joyce Archer's expression was so unusually benign, as she glanced towards the window and laid the evening paper on the library table, closing the door after her as noiselessly as a nurse who was unwilling to disturb a sleeping child, with a look which deepened and widened into a broad smile of inward satisfaction, as she retreated into her own especial room to blanch the almonds for dessert, and bring out of her stores an extra supply of candied fruits and fancies.

It was pleasant to behold the large delight that beamed in Joyce's kindly face as she fluttered from one dish to another and gave a sort of running commentary upon her thoughts.

"Dear me! how comfortable it is, to be sure; it all sounds very much like old times, that it does. Well, I didn't think the preserved ginger would turn out so good: it 'll do me some credit after all; and Mr. Nigel always likes my 'par-

ticular,' as he calls it. What a real gentleman he looks! But I'm sure he never was meant to marry a fine lady like Miss Winstanley, and it 's no use people meddling—not a bit; fancy won't be led nor driven. Now I'll gather a few cherries, and then my dessert will be something like. As to Miss Linda, she 's worth twenty Miss Winstanleys, houses and lands and all. She isn't just an image to look at. However, that 's neither here nor there, so I 'll keep my own counsel. But Miss Trissy Mills did say she never saw such a good-looking pair as Mr. Nigel and our Miss Linda, and I didn't contradict her, nor can I; one thing, he makes himself at home—that 's certain."

And so it was moreover. Nigel Gresley continued his visit at the Rectory longer than even Joyce Archer had ventured to hope. Ah, what a happy summer-time came to Linda! What a pleasure it was to cross the fields together and rest under the well-known cottage-porch by the brook, sweet with clustering honeysuckle—flower-laden, leaf-hidden honeysuckle, which had tempted the wild bees to leave long beds of clover far away over the common, and a pair of bright-winged goldfinches to weave their hidden nest in the corner, and old Norman himself to build up in

rustic fashion two inviting seats within. There he could sit by the hour alone and think, or sleep, if the warm sun gleamed lazily upon him; and there he could enjoy his old black-lettered books by turn, or tell his favourite stories to the two who so often came to hear them. Happy listeners! yet careless too, for how strangely the old man's stirring tales of adventure by sea and land wove themselves into their own thoughts of the present and future.

"So comes the whispering south wind to the sea,—
'Those raging storms are past; be still! I speak to thee,
And I have brought a fragrant store from sunny Araby!
So rest thy billowy crest;
Ah, rest thee—rest.

"'Still must thou murmur on of life's past mystery;
Then tell me where all future joys may meet their destiny.'
The waves came softly up and said, 'Where there is no more sea;
There rest thee with the blest;
There rest thee—rest.'

"Thus ever, in its calmest flow, Time's vast and restless sea
Came whispering to the rocks below, 'Love lives not here for me:
Here it begins its life of joy—there lives eternally—
There, evermore confessed,
In perfect joy, may rest.'"

Thus, nearing the haven of all earthly hopes, and realising at the same time that love but "wakens the soul and lends it wings for its sublime flight," these two passed those sunny hours; but another summer day stole on, and

brought with it the tidings that Nigel Gresley must soon exchange the pleasant companionship he had been enjoying, for the regular work and business which claimed him. Yes, this sweet country life and happy idleness was not much longer to be his, and in his old purpose-like fashion he looked the future in the face bravely. Thus to meet its hopes and fears was perhaps an easier task to Nigel than to others with less strength of mind and determination; but even for him, inclination had to do battle with duty before it had gained the mastery.

"Going to leave Hazelmere! well, to be sure!" exclaimed Rina Cliffe, as she stood before them in the gateway, knitting with busy fingers under the shade of its guardian trees. "Dear me! Well now, Mr. Nigel, you have never been into my cottage since the day that your dog caught my Black Milly in his great trap of a mouth and broke her leg, so come in now, and 'let bygones be bygones,' as Squire Hardie says."

"I will come in, with pleasure," said Nigel, laughing, "if you promise not to throw that old stool across the room at me, as you did then, when I offered you half-a-crown to pay the doctor's bill for Mistress Milly."

"Ah! you 've not forgotten it all, I see," replied Rina, a little testily. "I never could stand being laughed at when I was put out of my way. But come in, don't stand in the doorway, Miss Linda. Ah, well! I 've gone through a pretty hard reckoning for all my words and deeds since I gave Mr. Nigel a bit of my mind about his dog, and I can't say that I think the trouble and suffering have done me any harm, though there 's nothing to boast of in my temper now."

"I dare say," remarked Nigel, "that I did my full share of mischief in aggravating you; perhaps we should not succeed so well in getting up a scene, if we were to try now. It takes two to make a quarrel, and I feel wonderfully tamed by my sojourn in the very midst of bitter warfare and strife."

"Ah, dear me! yes. Miss Linda told me you had been in some danger among it all. I suppose you didn't like foreign parts mighty well? Did you see Mr. Dawson when you were out there?" asked Rina.

"Mr. Dawson?" repeated Nigel. "No; who is the worthy owner of the name?"

"Who is he?—Mr. Dawson, I tell you. Not know him! well, I am surprised. Everybody knows

him. He has a whole fleet of ships, and loads of gold for the digging—and—'most everything you can name. Not know him! Bless me! why, if you direct a letter to 'Mr. Dawson, Foreign Parts,' it 's quite enough, it would find him. 'Lisbeth, 'Lisbeth! come here and tell Mr. Nigel about Mr. Dawson's wonderful shipbuilding yards, where our Owen worked."

The sound of a merry but suppressed laugh reached them from an inner room, covered by the noise of an iron hastily laid on the stove, and an appeal to the baby not to be "such a silly little woman," and 'Lisbeth stood rosy and smiling before them.

"Never mind now, granny; you never could understand about the dockyards, and so Owen gave it up. And, Miss Linda, please to mind, Jacket is pulling the braid off your dress; there he is, look, ever so sly, at his old tricks of mischief. Really, what with our Lizzie and that bird," said 'Lisbeth, as she took Linda into the little parlour to repair the damage, "we have to look sharp, for they 're a pair of them—'regular sprites' Owen calls them."

Rina Cliffe did not long delay in giving Nigel Gresley her story of the past, and she had an

attentive listener. A singularly characteristic sketch she gave of herself. The picture was drawn with no sparing hand: its contrasts were unhesitatingly brought out, black and white—broad lines here, marked shadows there; but over all a clear light fell—it seemed to come from one bright figure that stood out in the foreground, with shining wings and loving face, and Rina's voice grew gentle as she thus pointed to her.

"No one ever touched me until Miss Linda came," she said. "No one ever had the power over me that she had: she would not be driven away, God bless her! She stayed, and stayed, until at length she came to be my good angel."

Nigel listened thoughtfully; he felt that with Rina Cliffe and himself the same influence had been at work. He knew that Linda was all this and more to him; that, shut up within himself in all the loneliness of a reserved nature—such, at least, as none had yet penetrated—she had quietly found entrance into his very soul, and so taken possession of that innermost heart of his that he too had found sweet comfort.

"'Lisbeth, come here," said Rina, as the garden gate closed upon her visitors. "I've been thinking, and thinking——"

"Well, granny, what about?" asked 'Lisbeth, hiding her wistful glance towards the friends who were gone, and a glistening tear, by her business-like manner and voice. "Look sharp and say what you've got to say, for I've left our Lizzie by the ironing-board, and there's no guard on the fire."

"Ah, well, I was thinking—but it was only this, child," replied Rina, slowly: "our Miss Linda has grown liker her cousin Nigel than I reckoned she was; and suppose it should come to that, 'Lisbeth, that he should take her away, what should I do?"

"Well, granny, I can't say; but you've Owen and me now, and the children. And suppose Miss Linda should be happiest with him—as happy, granny, as I was to go away with Owen—what then?"

"Ah, what then?" repeated Rina, thoughtfully; "that's true. Why, 'Lisbeth, then God bless them both, for this world and the next!—that 's all."

So Linda and Nigel passed on together homewards; and the spoken blessing seemed to rest upon them, even as the golden light of that sweet day's sunset had done, until it was gently curtained over by evening shadows, and, slanting lower still, dipped below their feet to gild the rippling

Haze, as they stood once more upon the old stone bridge, looking down upon the water.

There, where long ago Linda had written her resolve to forget her cousin—the very refrain echoing in her memory of the desire then hers, to

"Bring each wayward thought into captivity !"—

she stayed again, but with another changeless purpose. A dearer warder than she had ever dared to hope for was beside her now; the chains she wore were woven by sweetest fancy; never should they be severed, and not even the power of death itself could for long disunite them. And Linda's heart gave itself up to its beloved guardian in sweet content.

Nigel Gresley repeated Rina Cliffe's last words to the rector that evening, as he looked at Linda, and spoke of her as his "good angel." He was not answered at first; Mr. Conway's thoughts seemed far away.

"I recollect," he said at length, "how my little bird left the sheltering ivy on the Rectory and stayed a long, weary time outside the unfriendly casement at the Edge, patiently waiting there, until at last the small window was warily opened and the bright little bird flew in. I am not sur-

prised that another listener has heard the simple song, and loves it. Alas, for the old haunts among the ivy! for I fear me Robin will soon be off to find its own nest in the Hazel wood."

* * * * * *

The dainty bird flies in and out at pleasure, sometimes finding snug shelter among the rustling ivy, but oftener still flying off to its own choice shades in the woods, where its dear nest is safely hidden. Robin is quietly happy, and says little about the enjoyment to others, like a true English bird; but this is quite certain—the last winter song was a right merry one, and Nigel Gresley listened to it.

THE END.

LONDON.
PRINTED BY JAS. TRUSCOTT AND SON,
Suffolk Lane, City.