

THE BEST THAT I CAN.

"I cannot do much," said a little star;
 "To make the dark world bright,
 My silvery beams cannot struggle far
 Through the folding gloom at night;
 But I'm only a part of God's great plan,
 And I'll cheerfully do the best that I can."

"What is the use," said a fleecy cloud,
 "Of these few drops that I hold?
 They will hardly bend the lily proud
 Though caught in her cup of gold;
 Yet I am a part of God's great plan,
 So my treasure I'll give as well as I can."

A child went merrily forth to play,
 But a thought, like a silvery thread,
 Kept winding in and out all day
 Through the happy golden head;
 Mother said, "Darling, do all you can
 For you are a part of God's great plan."

She knew no more than the glancing star,
 Nor the cloud with its chalice-full,
 How, why and for what all strange things
 were;

She was only a child at school,
 But she thought, "It is part of God's great
 plan
 That even I should do all that I can."

She helped a younger child along
 When the road was rough to the feet,
 And she sang from her heart a little song
 That we all thought passing sweet;
 And her father, a weary toll-worn man,
 Said, "I will do likewise the best that I can."

Our best! Ah, children, the best of us
 Must hide our faces away
 When the Lord of the vineyard comes to look
 At our task at the close of the day,
 But for strength from above ('tis the Mas-
 ter's plan)
 We'll pray and we'll all do the best we can.

MR. ANONYMOUS.

PRESENT.

One afternoon, towards the end of September, the clocks in the City of London struck four, and the daily routine of business in the house of Puntin Brothers came to a close. These events were not peculiar to that particular day, but a story must have a beginning. The numerous clerks closed their ledgers, and stowed away their papers with far greater alacrity than they had shown in bringing them out some six or seven hours before; and as they put on their overcoats, hats and gloves, they began to chat with each other. One had got an order for the theatre for two, and asked another to have a chop with him somewhere, and then go thither; others were members of Volunteer Corps, and were in a hurry to get on their disguises, and go and be half-right turned somewhere. All had some personal object, pertaining to love, war, pleasure, or dinner, in view; in short, the striking of the clock had a magic power, and turned them from mechanical cogs into men.

One young man went up to the head of a department, and from him received papers, which he put into the breast-pocket of his coat, and then walked off without speaking to his fellow clerks, beyond bidding good-afternoon to one or another, and assenting once or twice to the fact of the weather being fine.

"A mean beggar, that Mapleson," said Jones, as he arranged the flower in his button-hole.

"Ay," replied Brown. "He dines for a shilling."

"And inks the rim of his hat."

"Perhaps he is poor," suggested the charitable Robinson.

"Poor!" cried Jones. "Who isn't? Millionaires are not commonly found on clerks' stools. He has a salary, and he is not married; and yet he stints, and never goes anywhere, or does anything."

"Perhaps he has a vice," suggested Robinson, who always fought the battle of the absent.

"Ah! he may have certainly," replied Jones the Just.

"But it isn't only his meanness," said Brown, who had made overtures to Mapleson, which had been met with more politeness than cordiality; "he is so confoundedly stuck up. Now, of all pride, I hate a mean pride."

The unconscious subject of all this disparagement walked down Cheapside to Saint Paul's Churchyard, where he stopped before a bonnet-shop.

"Still there," he muttered; "that is, lucky. How well it will become her!"

He entered, bought the bonnet which had taken his fancy, and with the little cardboard box in his hand, started off in the direction of Islington. In vain did Hansom cabbies raise their whips and omnibus cads cry: "'Ton! 'Ton!" He walked every step of the way home.

Home was a parlor on the ground floor—a bright and cheerful parlor, the ornaments and furniture of which,

though not costly, were in perfect taste. There were flowers; there was a piano, open; music and books lay about in a comfortable, but not untidy way. Home was a girl of nineteen, who welcomed him with a smile, called him Harry, and went into ecstasies over the bonnet. Home presently was tea, tea treated as a meal, not the meaningless supplement late diners understand by the term.

"What do you think, Harry?" exclaimed the young lady in the course of the meal.

"Think?" replied Harry Mapleson, with his mouth full; "why, I think that if there were many men of fortune who knew that I had a sister who could make such anchovy toast as this, they would soon carry her off from me."

"Young men of fortune do not marry their cooks; the new bonnet is much more likely to rid you of me. But what I was going to say was, we have got a goose."

"It isn't you, pussy, and it is not me," quoted the brother, turning to the cat.

"Oh, what grammar!"

"The verb 'to get' takes an accusative, Susan. But about the goose. How did you steal it?"

"Nohow; it came, together with its gibles, and half-a-dozen sherry."

"What! Mr. Anonymous again?"

"Yes."

"He is very good," said Harry, a serious expression coming over his face. "But there is one thing that I do wish he would send—his name. I hate mystery."

"But you like goose," added his sister.

"Well, yes; frankly, I do—sherry likewise. He says that he is an old friend of our parents; but if he is ashamed to acknowledge us now, I had sooner be without his charity. However, it is ungracious to say so; and after swallowing a twenty-pound note, it would be absurd to strain at a goose and gibles. We will eat the bird on the day set apart for that purpose by the church. Shall we invite our fellow-lodger?"

"Mr. Nicholson? Oh, certainly!"

When the tea-things were cleared away and the lamp lit, Susan Mapleson set to work upon her brother's buttons and socks, and while she sewed and darned, he read a novel aloud to her; equitable division of labor!

Just as he had finished a chapter, the hall-door closed, and observing that Mr. Nicholson had come in and that it would be a good plan to give him his invitation at once, Harry Mapleson rose and went out, returning presently, followed by the fellow-lodger, an elderly man with a slight stoop, who placed his hat and umbrella on a chair, and came forward to greet Susan, who took off her thimble to shake hands with him.

"Have you been to the British Museum to-day?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear; yes, as usual; I am a leech applied by the publishers to old books."

"A leech? No; a bee."

"Well, that is perhaps a prettier way of putting it, and more complimentary both to myself and the venerable authors I draw from; they are flowery enough sometimes too. But the bee skips from bud to blossom in a gay coquettish manner, which would never draw the honey out of a blackletter volume, let alone a mediæval manuscript. I fear that leech is more literal."

"But then, what term would you have left to apply to the publishers?" asked Harry.

"Nay, nay," said the old man; "I cannot complain. They pay me very well; there is not much competition in my musty line."

A typo in physiognomy might have pronounced Mr. Nicholson to be intellectual and benevolent, but it would have taken an adept in the art to decipher the expression which habitually spread over his features. There was a weary, hopeless, hunted look, which told of great suffering, either mental or physical—probably the former, for the deep lines about his mouth and eyes were of that character which is worn by sustained rather than spasmodic action of the muscles. He was a man with a terrible secret sorrow. I do not say that you would have gathered all this on the present occasion, for when he was in the society of the Maplesons he was a different being. He was a lonely man; most workers have two lives, a professional and a natural one, but until quite lately he had been a student and nothing else; studying for his livelihood, studying for companionship, even at meal-times; studying to find an opiate. But since he had formed an acquaintanceship which soon ripened into friendship

with the young brother and sister, life had acquired a new interest for him, and that little parlor was an ark on the salt waste of his existence.

He promised to dine with them on Michaelmas day; and then Susan gave him his greatest treat—some of Mendelssohn's music. He would sit and listen till the water came into his eyes; and this was not such a very curious phenomenon, for though the girl was not any very brilliant performer, treating her instrument like a musical trapeze, and going through all sorts of wonderful gymnastic feats upon it, she played with rare feeling and expression, sending the notes into the heart as it were. At half-past ten the party broke up. Harry Mapleson considered that as his sister rose early to look after domestic matters, and get his breakfast for him (for even a very small establishment requires considerable attention when you have only got the third part of a servant to "do" for you), she ought to be early at the other end of the day too; so he invariably yawned and went up to his room at the top of the house before eleven. But when he got there, he made no preparations for going to bed, but put writing materials out on a table, and drawing from his pocket the papers which he had received from one of the heads of departments before leaving the office, he sat down to work. It was three o'clock before his task was accomplished.

"A slice of luck this," he said to himself on turning in at last; "just as I was wondering how I should meet those payments I had overlooked without cutting off some little expense, which would show Susan that I am hard up, I get this extra job of work which will set me straight. What a manager that girl is! I am afraid she stints herself in dress and that, though, which must not be; it shall not be, mother, if I can help it." And thinking of her who was gone, he fell asleep.

Susan's bedroom communicated with the parlor, and when her brother and Mr. Nicholson went up stairs, she passed into it, returning again soon with a quantity of millinery materials, from which she proceeded to concoct one of those articles of feminine adornment which fathers and husbands pay so highly for.

"Poor old Harry!" her thoughts ran as her nimble fingers worked. "He thinks that I do not see that his salary is too little for our expenses, and I durst not remonstrate with him when he wastes his money upon things I really do not want; it would disappoint him so! How fortunate it is that I have got this knack of making things; which secures me employment at my own home! How little he thinks that I so often follow him into London, carrying my work to the shop when it is completed! The ordinary seamstress's work I tried at first was not worth while, but they pay well for this. I wish Harry would spend a little upon himself; I durst not give him a new coat or hat in return for his mantillas and bonnets. The idea of his getting me that; how surprised he would be to learn that I made it."

The air of Harrow-on-the-Hill must be peculiarly bracing, if the proverbial sentiment about the bird of St. Michael, attributed to the boys educated there, be founded on anything like practical experience. The goose, they say, is an awkward dainty, being too much for one, and not enough for two. I know that if I had two sons who "asked for more" after finishing a goose at a sitting, I should write to the *Times*. It is true that there are geese and geese, and the specimen sent to the Maplesons may have been exceptionally fine; but though they had gone into training, as it were, by dining at six instead of at one, and though they had the fellow-lodger to help them, they left pickings; and if some Harrovian curls the lip of scorn, I cannot help it; truth is my hobby.

When they had got their first glasses of sherry after the meal, Harry said; "We must drink the health of Mr. Anonymous, please."

"Mr. Anonymous," repeated Susan sipping.

"Mr. Anonymous," echoed Mr. Nicholson, who drank, and then added, "Some relative?"

"I don't know," replied Harry, "He is a deed, or rather a succession of deeds, without a name. He sent us the goose; he sent us this sherry; he has made us more valuable presents. Do you think I ought to receive benefits without knowing from whom they come?"

"Certainly," said the fellow-lodger. "I think you have told me that in one of his first letters this unknown professed himself a friend of your—your mother's. Am I correct?"

"Yes. But why such mystery?"

"Oh, there are several probable reasons for that; he may be ashamed of not doing more. You may have substantial claims upon him as a trustee of those funds which I think you said had been unwisely invested; or he may have a morbid dislike to being thanked."

"It is strange anyhow," said Harry, "that our mysterious benefactor should not have come forward to assist us when we most needed it."

"When you lost your mother?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps," said Susan, "he was not in England then, and knew nothing about what had happened."

"That is very likely," said Mr. Nicholson, "especially as you were supposed to be well provided for. Have you not said so?"

"Yes," replied Harry; "our poor mother's little property was in a bank which broke; but, thank God! she did not know what happened. She died in the belief that her children were beyond the reach of sordid cares."

"It was about two years ago, I think you have said?"

"Yes, two years last August. I was at college when summoned away to her bedside, for her illness was sudden and short. And just as we were recovering a little from the shock, ruin came. If I had been alone in the world I think that I should have enlisted or emigrated, for I felt very desperate; but fortunately I had Susan to look after, and that steadied me. Well, we must not complain. I was fortunate to get my clerkship, and we managed to save that piano, and a few things which were sacred in our eyes, from the wreck."

"It was a sad blow, and the cares of life have fallen upon you early, my young friends," said Mr. Nicholson, "but pardon me for having led the conversation into such a melancholy channel," he added, seeing that Susan had much ado to restrain her tears. "I do not know how it happened."

"Oh, Harry and I often talk over old times; I like it," said Susan. "It would be a dreadful thing to avoid speaking of mamma because she has been taken from us. It seems to me that those we love are only really 'lost' when we banish them from our memories."

The old man bowed his head and sighed deeply. "Have you any likeness of her?" he asked after a pause.

"Oh, yes," replied Susan, and she rose and placed a miniature portrait in his hand.

He gazed at it in silence for some time and then murmured, "How like?"

"You knew our mother," exclaimed Harry in surprise.

"I mean how like your sister," said Mr. Nicholson, handing the miniature to him.

"Oh, yes, there is a strong family resemblance," said Harry. "But since you will not have any moresher, suppose we go up to your room and smoke a pipe while Susan makes tea."

When the old man and the young one had settled down to the mutual absorption of nicotine, the latter referred again to the subject of his personal affairs.

"The only thing I regret," said he, "is the way in which my sister is shut up. It must be a dreadful thing for her, poor girl, to be alone all day; and it is bad for her to be entirely without any companion of her own sex."

"Have you no relatives nor friends?" asked Mr. Nicholson.

Our relatives cast us off many years ago on account of a family misfortune. But there were some friends, who got me my present appointment, and who would have taken charge of Susan. We declined, because of that family affair; for Susan thought, and I thought, that it would perhaps be brought up against her, if she mixed in the society to which these friends would have introduced her. Of course we did not put our refusal upon that ground; Susan said that she would not leave me, and I believe they think me very wrong and selfish. I am not quite confident that I am right myself; and yet the pride which shrinks from raking up an old shame can hardly be a false pride—can it?"

It is not an easy thing to decide in a moment the degree of pride which every man ought to allow himself—to point where the Proper ends, and the False begins—to beat the parish bounds between self-respect and vanity. No wonder that Mr. Nicholson puffed hard at his pipe in silence. It was evidently no lack of interest that held his tongue, however, for he turned away his head, and his hand shook as though it were palsied. And probably Harry did not look for a reply; he was thinking aloud as much as talking to the other; and