

CROSSING THE BROOK.

BY ADELINE.

THE chill November afternoon was drawing to a close. A drizzling rain seemed likely to succeed the dense fog that had been for the last few hours settling down in heavy folds on the picturesque village of Ashleigh Combe, and the broad yet usually shallow stream that dashed noisily from the adjacent rocky hills, and then glided more peacefully through rich meadows and pasture lands into the smooth waters of the Ouse, had the peculiar and well-known sound that indicated an increase of its volume and depth. The heavy rains that had fallen naturally accounted for this, but no alarm was excited, for rarely had the lowlands been flooded by its overflow, or any serious inconveniences been experienced from its rise. At present the otherwise beautiful landscape, with its fields and woods, and range of fir-crowned hills in the distance, was obscured by the fog which hung like a pall over its loveliness. Labourers—chill and weary—were hastily wending their way through dim lanes and wood paths, impatient to reach their homes before the daylight should have totally faded. A few, indeed, lingered at the doors of the "Red Lion," unable to withstand the tempting glare which streamed from its uncurtained windows, and quite lighted up the corner of the narrow street; but the greater number,—decent and sober men,—were seeking the warmth and shelter of their own bright and cheerful firesides.

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"Has your father not come yet?" inquired a poor sufferer in feeble tones, as she turned wearily on her sick couch. "Is it not late, Nellie?" "Not yet, mother," replied the little maiden of eleven, coming nearer to the somewhat comfortless looking bed;—"Father will be home soon, I think; he promised to come home early this evening,—and I do think he will," she added with energy, noting the sad, almost hopeless, expression that flitted over the wan features. "Do you feel better, dear mother?"

"No, Nellie, dear; no better. I shall not be better in this world, but yonder—far away—I see the better country, and the shining angels, and there—"

"O, mother, mother!" sobbed Nellie, as she dropped on her knees and clasped the thin hand that rested on the poor coverlet, "don't, don't talk so! I cannot bear it! You will get better, mother, darling, you must—you must. What will father do, and baby, and Charley? O, mother!" And poor Nellie broke down in a fit of uncontrollable weeping.

"My darling," sighed the mother, "my poor Nellie, it is hard work. The Lord strengthen thee to bear thy heavy burdens."

"O mother," said Nellie, when the passionate burst of grief had a little spent itself, "you must not leave us yet. Dr. Grey said he really thought you were better to-day, and I am sure your eyes are brighter, and you look—you look—"

But Nellie could not go on, for all at once there rushed over her mind with overwhelming bitterness the remembrance of certain words spoken by Dr. Grey to a neighbour in reference to her mother a few days previously—words she had scarcely heeded at the time, but which now recurred to her with a thrill of anguish; for she suddenly read in the unnatural brilliancy of those dark eyes, and the deep

hectic that flushed the sunken cheeks, the too sure premonitions of decay and death.

Mrs. Payne withdrew her hand from the child's eager clasp, and laid it gently on the bright, drooping head. Sad, sad thoughts filled her heart at that moment, for well she knew that she had come to the brink of the dark river whose waters must be crossed alone. It was not on her own account that dark forebodings shadowed her wasting life, but for the little helpless ones left to the mercies of a cold world; for the husband, whom she still loved, although for many weary months he had neglected his home, and sought in the excitement of the taproom a substitute for the quiet happiness he once enjoyed at his own bright hearth. Ah, there was the sting! She could have told of blighted hopes and ruined prospects, of many a weary vigil, of loneliness and anguish, of poverty and sorrow, but she had never reproached him. In the fear of God she had striven to train up her children, and to make her home as far as possible a happy one; but alas! alas for the little ones, when the besotted father reels there degraded and helpless—in the horrible grasp of the demon of intemperance.

"Nellie, darling," said Mrs. Payne, but her voice was low and faint, "it is God who is taking me from you. He knows what is best, and I know and feel that He will care for you all. Can not you trust mother with such a loving friend, Nellie? O, dear child, love that Saviour who has done so much for you, and then we shall meet again in a brighter world than this, where there will be no sin, no pain, no sorrow."

She was too utterly exhausted to say more. Nellie restrained her sobs, and seeing her mother's faintness stole away to prepare some tea before her father should arrive. The scanty fire scarcely sufficed for the purpose, and the little stock of fuel was rapidly diminishing. Poor Nellie sighed, and shivered as she looked at it. Darkness had already closed in around the little cottage, and heavy raindrops were beating against the casement. She felt very sad and lonely. Surely it was time for her father to arrive. Where could he be? Her little brother, Charlie, had been taken by a kind neighbour for a day or two, that the poor sick mother might have the quiet she needed. Baby slept soundly in his cot, so Nellie busied herself in arranging some matters for her father's comfort, and soon took up a cup of tea to the weary invalid. But she was startled by the already changed expression of the wan features. That strange, mysterious, undefinable impress, which even a child may comprehend, had settled upon them, and Nellie almost felt that she was alone with death. It was too much for her sensitive, overwrought spirit, and throwing an old shawl over her head, she rushed out to her nearest neighbour.

"Mrs. Newby, do come. My mother, O my mother, is——"

"Is what, Nellie? worse?" said Mrs. Newby, looking at her compassionately.

"O, dying, dying! I am sure she is!" sobbed Nellie. "Do come—no one is with her."

"I will come at once, my dear," said Mrs. Newby; "but where is your father?"

"Oh, I don't know. He ought to be there. I will go and seek him."

"It is not fit for you to be out such a night as this, Nellie," said Mrs. Newby, hesitatingly; "but John is out. I have no one to send. Have you any idea where he may be?"

(To be concluded in our next.)