The Apricot Tree

Unknown

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THE

APRICOT TREE.

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[Illustration]

THE APRICOT-TREE.

It was a fine evening in the beginning of autumn. The last rays of the sun, as it sunk behind the golden clouds, gleamed in at the window of a cottage, which stood in a pleasant lane, about a quarter of a mile from the village of Ryefield. On each side of the narrow gravel walk that led from the lane to the cottage-door, was a little plot of cultivated ground. That on the right hand was planted with cabbages, onions, and other useful vegetables; that on the left, with gooseberry and currant-bushes, excepting one small strip, where stocks, sweet-peas, and rose-trees were growing; whose flowers, for they were now in full bloom, peeping over the neatly trimmed quick-hedge that fenced the garden from the road, had a gay and pretty appearance. Not a weed was to be found in any of the beds; the gooseberry and currant-bushes had evidently been pruned with much care and attention, and were loaded with fine ripe fruit. But the most remarkable thing in the garden was an apricot-tree, which grew against the wall of the cottage, and which was covered with apricots of a large size and beautiful colour.

The cottage itself, though small and thatched with straw, was clean and cheerful, the brick floor was strewed with sand, and a white though coarse cloth was spread on the little deal table. On this table were placed tea-things, a loaf of bread, and some watercresses. A cat was purring on the hearth, and a kettle was boiling on the fire.

Near the window, in a large arm-chair, sat an old woman, with a Bible on her knees. She appeared happy and contented, and her countenance expressed cheerfulness and good temper. After reading for some time with great attention, she paused to look from the window into the lane, as if expecting to see some one. She listened as if for a footstep; but all was silent. She read again for about ten minutes longer, and then closing the Sacred Volume, rose, and, having laid the Book carefully on a shelf, opened the door, and went out into the garden, whence she could see farther into the lane, and remained for a considerable time leaning over the little wicket gate, in anxious expectation.

"What can be the reason that Ned is so late?" she said, half aloud, to herself. "He always hastens home to his poor old grandmother as soon as he has done work. What can make him an hour later than usual? I hope nothing has happened to him. But, hush!" she continued, after a few

minutes' pause, "surely I hear him coming now."

She was not mistaken, for in a minute or two Ned appeared, running quite fast up the lane, and in a few moments more he was standing by her side, panting and breathless.

"Dear grandmother," he exclaimed, as soon as he had recovered breath enough to speak, "I have a great deal of good news to tell you. Farmer Tomkyns says he will employ me all through the winter, and pay me the same wages that he does now. This is one piece of good news. And the other is, that Mr. Stockwell, the greengrocer, will buy all my apricots, and give me a good price for them. I am to take them to him next market-day. I had to wait more than half-an-hour before I could speak to him, and that made me so late. O how beautiful they are!" continued he, gazing with admiration at the tree. "O grandmother, how happy I am!"

His grandmother smiled, and said she was glad to hear this good news. "And now come in and have your tea, child," she added; "for I am sure you must be hungry."

"O grandmother," said Ned, as they sat at tea, "now that Mr. Stockwell will buy the fruit, you will be able to have a cloak to keep you warm this winter. It often used to grieve me, last year, to see you obliged to go to church such bitter cold weather, with only that thin old shawl on. I know you said you could not spare money to get a cloak for yourself, because you had spent all you could save in buying me a jacket. My tree has never borne fruit till this year; and you always said that when it did, I should do what I pleased with the money its fruit would fetch. Now, there is nothing I should like to spend it on better than in getting a cloak for you."

"Thank you, Ned," replied his grandmother; "it would indeed be a very great comfort. I do not think I should have suffered so much from rheumatism last winter, if I had had warmer clothing. If it was not for your apricot-tree, I must have gone without a cloak this winter also; for, what with our pig dying, and your having no work to do in the spring, this has been but a bad year for us."

"The money Mr. Stockwell is going to give me," resumed Ned, "will be enough all but sixpence; and I have a new sixpence, you know, in a little box upstairs, that my aunt gave me last June, when I went to spend the day with her; so when I carry him the fruit, I shall take that in my pocket, and then when I come home in the evening I can bring the cloak with me. O that will be a happy day!" continued Ned, getting up to jump and clap his hands for joy.

"There is another thing I am very glad of," said he, sitting down again. "Master is going to turn Tom Andrews away next week."

"You ought not to be glad of that, Ned. Tom is one of a large family; and his father being very poor, it must be a great help to have one of his children earning something."

"But he is ill-natured to me, and often plagues me very much. It was only yesterday he broke the best hoe, by knocking stones about with it, and then told master it was my doing. Besides, he is idle, and does not mind what is said to him, and often gets into mischief."

"And do you think being turned away from Farmer Tomkyns's will help to cure these faults?"

"No," answered Ned; "I do not suppose it will."

"On the contrary, is it not likely that he will grow more idle, and get oftener into mischief, when he has no master to look after him, and nothing to do all day long but play about the streets?"

"Why, yes, that is true. Still, it will serve him right to be turned away. I have heard Mr. Harris, our rector, say that those who do wrong ought to be punished."

"Pray, Ned," asked his grandmother, "can you tell me what is the use of punishment?"

"The use of punishment!--" repeated Ned, thoughtfully. "Let me think. The use of punishment, I believe, is to make people better."

"Right. Now, Ned, you have allowed that Tom's being turned away is not likely to make him better, but worse; so that I am afraid the true reason why you rejoice at his disgrace is because you bear resentment against him, for having been ill-natured to yourself. Think a minute, and tell me if this is not the case."

Ned owned that his grandmother was right; and then observed, "It is very difficult not to bear ill-will against any one who has done us wrong."

"Yet," rejoined his grandmother, "it is our duty to pardon those who have injured us. St. Paul says, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, 'Be ye kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.' And our blessed Saviour has commanded us to 'love our enemies,' to 'do good to them that hate us, and to pray for those that despitefully use us, and persecute us.' If you will look at the fourteenth and fifteenth verses of the sixth chapter of St. Matthew, you will see what else our Lord says on the subject."

Ned took the Bible, and having found the place, read, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses."

"Before you go to bed," said his grandmother, when he had finished reading, "I wish you to get by heart these three texts, and repeat them to me."

Ned did as he was desired, and then his grandmother kissed him, and bid him good-night.

Ned loved his grandmother very much, for she had always been kind to him. His parents had both died when he was very young; and she then brought him home to live with her, and had taken care of him ever since. She taught him to read and write, and cast up sums; to be steady and industrious; and, above all, it was her great care to instil into his mind religious principles. She had often told him that the way to profit by what we read, as well as by the good advice that may be given us, is to think upon it afterwards; and she frequently desired him to make a practice of saying over to himself every night whatever verses from the Bible he had learnt by heart during the day.

This evening, when Ned repeated his texts, he felt that he had been wrong to rejoice at Tom Andrews's disgrace, because he had behaved ill to himself; and he prayed God to make Tom see his faults, and leave off

his bad ways.

The next day Ned, as usual, went early to his work. Tom Andrews was very teasing, but Ned tried not to be provoked; and when Tom said ill-natured things to him, he checked the angry replies he was tempted to make. Two days afterwards, when Ned came home to tea, he thought with pleasure that to-morrow was market-day at the town where Mr. Stockwell lived; and he ran in and out twenty times, to look at, and admire, his beautiful apricot-tree. "I must get up very early indeed to-morrow morning," he said to his grandmother, "that I may gather the apricots, and take them to Mr. Stockwell before I go to my work." Accordingly the next morning he rose as soon as it was light, and, taking a basket the greengrocer had lent him in his hand, went into the little garden to line it with fresh green leaves, before putting the fruit into it.

What was his surprise and sorrow when he saw that every one of his apricots was gone, and the tree itself sawn nearly in two, close to the root!

Throwing down his basket, Ned ran to his grandmother, who was just come down stairs, and had begun to light the fire.

He could only exclaim, "O my apricots, my apricots, they are all gone! And my beautiful tree--" then covering his face with his hands, he burst into tears.

"What is the matter, my dear?" inquired his grandmother.

Ned replied by taking her by the hand, and leading her into the garden.

"Who can have done this?" he exclaimed, sobbing. "If they had only stolen the apricots, I could have borne it better! But to see my dear tree spoiled--It must die--it must be quite killed--only look how it is cut!"

"I am very sorry for you, my poor boy," said his grandmother, kindly. "It is a most vexatious thing."

"Oh!" cried Ned, "if I did but know who it was that had done it--"

"I would be revenged on them, some how or other," he was going to have added; but the texts which he had learned a few days before concerning the forgiveness of injuries, and which he had frequently repeated to himself since, came into his mind, and he stopped short.

On looking round the garden, to see if they could discover any traces of the thief, Ned and his grandmother saw the prints of a boy's shoe, rather bigger than Ned's, in several of the beds, and hanging on the quick-hedge were some tattered fragments of a red cotton handkerchief checked with white. "I know this handkerchief," said Ned; "it is Tom Andrews's; I have often seen him with it tied round his neck. It must be he who stole my apricots."

"You cannot be sure that it is Tom who stole your apricots," rejoined his grandmother. "Many other people besides him have red handkerchiefs."

"But I am sure it can be no one but Tom; for only yesterday, when I told him about my apricots, and the money I expected to get for them, he said he wished he knew how to get some, that he might have money too. Oh! if I could but get hold of him--"

Again he stopped, and thought of our Saviour's words; then, turning to his grandmother, he said, "Whoever it is that has robbed us of the fruit, I forgive him, even if it is Tom Andrews."

Ned went to work that day with a heavy heart. Tom Andrews was in high glee; for his master had said he would give him another week's trial. Ned told him of the misfortune that had happened to him, and thought that Tom looked rather confused. He also remarked that his companion had not got the red handkerchief on that he usually wore about his neck; and he asked him the reason.

"I tore it last night, scrambling through a hedge," replied Tom carelessly.

"How came you to be scrambling through a hedge last night?" inquired Ned.

"What makes you ask me that question?" returned the other, sharply.

"Because," answered Ned, fixing his eyes upon him, "because the person who stole my apricots left part of a red handkerchief hanging on our hedge."

"Do you mean to say, then, that _I_ stole them?" exclaimed his companion, in an angry tone. "I'll teach you to tell this of me."

So saying, he struck Ned a blow on the face with his fist, before Ned was aware what he was going to do.

Ned was very much tempted to strike in return; but just as he raised his arm, something seemed to whisper that he ought not to do so; and, drawing back a few steps, he called after Tom, who was beginning to run away, saying,

"You need not be afraid of me. I am not going to strike you, though you did strike me; because it is wrong to return evil for evil."

"Fine talking, indeed!" rejoined Tom, tauntingly. "I know very well the reason why you will not strike me again. You dare not, because I am the biggest and strongest. You are afraid of me."

Now Ned was no coward. He would have fought in a good cause with a boy twice his size; and he was very much provoked at the words and manner of his companion.

He had a hard struggle with himself not to return the blow; but he kept firm to the good resolution he had made, and went away.

As he was returning home very sorrowful, he could not help thinking how happy he had expected to be that evening; and he regretted extremely that his grandmother would have no cloak to keep her warm in the cold weather. Still, the recollection that he had patiently borne the blow and insulting speeches of Tom, and thus endeavoured to put in practice the good precepts he had been taught, consoled him, and made him feel less sad than he would otherwise have been.

"How did you get that black eye, Ned?" asked his grandmother, as soon as she saw him. "I hope you have not been fighting."

"No, grandmother, indeed I have not," replied Ned; and he told her how it had happened.

His grandmother said that he was a good boy to have acted as he did, and added, "It makes me happier to find that you behave well, than twenty new cloaks would."

The next day, at dinner time, when Ned went into the little outhouse where he and Tom usually ate this meal, he found Tom sitting there crying.

"What makes you cry, Tom?" inquired Ned.

"Because I have no dinner," was the reply.

"How happens that?" asked Ned.

"Because, now father's out of work, mother says she can only give us two meals a-day. I only had a little bit of bread this morning; and I shall have nothing else till I go home in the evening, and then she will give me a cold potato or two."

Ned's grandmother had given him that day for his dinner a large slice of bread, and a piece of cold bacon. Ned had been working hard, and was very hungry. He could have eaten all the bread and bacon with pleasure, and felt certain that if he had got no dinner and Tom had, Tom would not have given him any of his. He recollected that Tom had never in his life shown him any kindness; that, a fortnight ago, when Tom had had four apples given him, he had eaten them all himself, without even offering him part of one; and, above all, he called to mind that Tom was in all probability the person who had robbed him of his apricots, and killed his favourite apricot-tree.

But he remembered our Saviour's command, "Do good to them that hate you;" and though Tom was a bad boy, yet it grieved Ned to see him crying with hunger, whilst he himself had food to eat. So he divided both the bread and the bacon into two equal shares, with his knife, and then, going up to Tom, gave him one portion, and desired him to eat it. Tom looked at Ned in some surprise, and then, taking the food that was offered him, ate it in a ravenous manner, without saying a word.

"He might just have thanked me," thought Ned to himself; but he forbore to tell Tom so.

Ned always read a chapter in the Bible to his grandmother every night when he came home from work. It happened that this evening the chapter fixed on was the twelfth of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. He was much struck by one of the verses in it: "Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head."

"Grandmother," said Ned, when he had concluded the chapter, "I understand the first part of this verse very well, it is plain enough; but what is meant by the words, 'for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head?'"

His grandmother replied, that this passage had once puzzled her; but that an old lady with whom she had lived when she was a girl, and who kindly took great pains in explaining different parts of the Bible that were hard to be understood, had made this quite clear to her.

"She told me," continued his grandmother, "that the Apostle alludes to the custom of melting gold and other metals by fire; and his meaning is,

that as coals of fire melt and soften the metals on which they are heaped, so by kindness and gentleness we may melt and soften our enemy, and make him love, instead of hating us."

Ned thanked his grandmother for this explanation, and then was silent for some little time.

"Perhaps," he said to himself, "if I go on being kind to Tom Andrews, I shall at last make him love me, and leave off teasing me and saying ill-natured things."

He would not tell his grandmother that he had given Tom part of his dinner, for fear she should another day give him more; and he knew she could not do this without robbing herself.

Tom's father remained out of work for several weeks; and Tom would have been obliged to go without a dinner most days, if Ned had not regularly given him half his.

For some time Tom received his companion's kindness sulkily, and without appearing at all grateful; but at last Ned's good-natured conduct appeared to touch him, and he said--

"How kind you are to me, Ned! though I am sure I have done nothing to deserve kindness from you. Father often says he wishes I was more like you; and I do think I should be happier if I was, for you always seem cheerful and contented, though you work harder than I do."

"I like working," answered Ned; "nothing makes me so dull as being idle. Besides, as grandmother says, people are far more likely to do wrong when they are not employed. You know the lines in the hymn,--

'For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do,'"

Tom looked down and coloured.

Ned, who had not meant to give him pain by what he said, added, on observing Tom's confusion--

"I have so many things I like to do when I go home after work, that I don't deserve praise for not being idle."

"I wish I had anything I liked to do when work is over," returned Tom; "but I have nothing to do but play, and I soon get tired of that."

"So do I," rejoined Ned. "I like a game of ball or cricket every now and then as well as anybody; but it is a great waste of time, to say the least of it, to spend all one's spare hours in play; besides, as you say, we get tired, and do not enjoy play if we have too much of it."

"What do you do of an evening, that is so pleasant?" inquired Tom.

"Why I keep our little garden in order;--that takes up a good deal of time; and I write a copy, and do a sum or two, and read the Bible to grandmother."

"I should like that very well," observed Tom, "all except reading the Bible."

"Oh, do not say so!" exclaimed Ned; "surely you do not mean it."

"I dare say," rejoined Tom, "that I should like the Bible well enough if I could understand it; but it's so hard! _You_ understand it all, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear no! that I do not; but grandmother sometimes explains what is hard, and tells me a great many pleasing things about the manners of the country where our Saviour and his Apostles lived. I never am happier than when I read to her, and she talks to me about what I have read."

"Well," said Tom, "mother hears me read a chapter now and then, but she always seems to think it a trouble; and so I read as fast as I can, to get it the sooner over. Father commonly says, he's too tired to listen."

Ned said no more on the subject then; but when they had both done work, he asked Tom if he would like to walk home with him, and look at his garden.

Tom hesitated at first; there seemed to be something in the idea that made him uncomfortable. But he had been gradually growing fond of Ned, and Ned's account of the pleasures and comfort of his home had made him wish to go there; so he told his companion that he would go with him.

Ned's grandmother received the two boys very kindly, and gave them some tea and bread and butter. Having learned from Tom that his parents would not be uneasy at his absence, she asked him to stay with them all the evening.

The next day Tom looked wistfully at Ned, as if he wished to go home with him, but did not like to say anything about it. Ned observed this, and told him that his grandmother had said he might come whenever he liked.

"Then I'll go to-night," said Tom.

And accordingly he went home with Ned that evening, and almost every evening afterwards for some time. He helped Ned to work in his garden, and took a part in all his other employments. Ned always read the Bible after tea, which Tom at first thought very tiresome; and he would not have stayed, had he not wished for Ned's company afterwards to walk part of the way back with him to the village; but soon he became so much interested in what he heard read, as well as by the improving and interesting conversation of Ned's grandmother, that he looked forward to the evening's reading as one of the pleasantest events of the day.

One afternoon, as the two boys were digging a bed in the garden, Tom said to his companion--

"I have long been going to tell you of something that makes me very uncomfortable; but I have never yet had courage to do it. I know you think that I stole your apricots, don't you?"

Ned did not immediately reply. His good-nature made him unwilling to own that he _did_ suspect Tom; and he could not tell an untruth, by saying that he did not suspect him.

"Well," continued Tom, "I am sure you must; and I do not wonder at it. Now the truth is, that when you told me about your apricots, I thought to myself that I would come when it was dusk, and take two or three of

them just to eat, thinking that you would not miss such a small number. But I did not like to go by myself; so I asked Fred Morris if he would go with me. He said, 'O yes; he would go anywhere, or do anything, to get some apricots.' He did not know of your tree, he added; or he should have paid it a visit before. I began to be sorry I had told him, and made him promise that he would not take more than three. When it got dark, and we were set out, I felt that I was doing very wrong. I wished to turn back; but Fred would not let me. He said I need not take any fruit myself if I wanted to back out; but that if I did not go with him to show him the tree, he would beat me within an inch of my life. So we came to the wicket together; it was fastened, and we clambered over the hedge. Fred had a large basket with him, which I had several times asked him about, and tried to make him say what he brought it for. He told me that I should see when the time came. As soon as he got to the tree, he began gathering the apricots as fast as he could, and putting them into his basket. I tried to hinder him, and said I would shout and wake you; but he declared that, if I did, he would kill me; and you know, Ned, he is nearly twice as big as I am, and terribly violent; so all I could do was to hold my tongue, and let him alone. Just as we were going away, he caught up a saw that was lying in the garden, and spoiled the tree with it. I do believe he did this just for the love of mischief, or maybe partly to spite me, because I had told him not to steal all the apricots. He would not let me have one for my share; though I do not think I could have eaten it if he had, I was so much frightened, and so surprised at him for stealing all your fruit. He besides ordered me not to tell what he had done, and bullied me a great deal about it, till at last I got away from him. I was too much afraid to tell you for a good while, but I could not bear that you should think I had been so very wicked; and at last I made up my mind to tell you exactly how it was.

"I know that I have been very wrong," continued Tom; "and that if it had not been for me the apricots would not have been stolen. I can't be more sorry than I am. And now that you have heard all, Ned, will you forgive me, and try not to think as badly of me as I deserve?"

Ned said he was glad to hear Tom had had no more share in the affair; and then, holding out his hand to Tom, he assured him of his entire forgiveness.

"Indeed, Tom," he added, "I forgave you in my heart long ago."

"I am sure you did," rejoined Tom warmly, "or you would not have been so kind to me. O Ned, you cannot think how unhappy it makes me when I recollect how often I have been teasing and ill-natured to you, notwithstanding your good-nature to me!"

"Say no more about that," replied Ned; "you have not been teasing or ill-natured lately. We shall, I hope, always be good friends for the future."

When Tom was gone, Ned related this conversation to his grandmother.

"I think," she observed, when he concluded, "that all Tom's sin in this matter came from breaking the tenth commandment. If he had not first coveted the apricots, he would not have been tempted to steal them. Through earnestly desiring what did not belong to him, he was led not only to commit a great sin himself, but to be the means of leading a fellow-creature into sin also. Fred Morris would not have thought of robbing the apricot-tree had not Tom put it into his head. In the Bible we are frequently charged not to lead our brother into sin; and heavy punishments are denounced against him who shall cause another to do

evil."

"I used to think, grandmother," observed Ned, "that the tenth commandment must be the least important of all; I did not suppose there could be any very great harm in merely wishing for what belongs to another person; but I shall never think so in future."

Several weeks passed away, and the weather began to grow cold and winterly. Ned could not help sighing when he saw his grandmother suffering from the cold, and recollected that she had no cloak to keep her warm, and would have none all the winter.

He sometimes sighed, too, as he looked at the apricot-tree, whose branches were now dead and withering; and so did Tom. Both the boys agreed that it had better be cut down, and taken away entirely.

"How I wish," exclaimed Tom, "that we had another to put in its place!"

"So do I," rejoined Ned; "but apricot-trees, I believe, are very dear to buy. A gardener my father used to work for, and who is now dead, gave me this. I fear there is no chance of our ever getting another."

"How I do wish I was rich!" cried Tom; "I would give you an apricot-tree, and all manner of things besides. I should like to be as rich as our Squire best; but it would do to be as rich as Farmer Tomkyns. Oh, if I had only half as many sheep, and pigs, and cows, and haystacks, as he has, how happy I should be! Don't you wish you had some of the Squire's or Farmer Tomkyns's riches, Ned?"

"No," replied Ned, "I don't; because we ought not to wish for other people's things."

He then told Tom all that he could remember of what his grandmother had said to him about the sin of coveting what does not belong to us; and that doing so, besides breaking one commandment, is very likely to lead to the breaking of others also.

"But," asked Tom, "how is it possible to help longing sometimes for things we have not got, and yet see other people have?" "We may not," said Ned's grandmother, who had come out to call the boys in to tea, and had overheard the latter part of their conversation; "we may not, perhaps, be always able to prevent covetous or envious thoughts from entering our mind; but we should directly endeavour to drive them away, and pray to God to make us contented with 'that state of life in which it has pleased Him to place us.' 'Be content with such things as ye have,' says St. Paul. And again, speaking of himself, he tells us, 'I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content.' Besides, Tom, the rich are not always happy. They have a great many cares and anxieties that we know nothing of. You cannot have forgotten what trouble Farmer Tomkyns was in last spring when so many of his cattle died of the distemper, and he was afraid he should lose the rest. It is true the Squire can afford to have always a grand dinner to sit down to; but of what use is that when he is, and has been for years, in such a bad state of health that the choicest dainties afford him no pleasure! Do not you think, Tom, that if you were in his place, you would gladly give all the fine clothes, dainty food, and wealth that you possessed, to be strong and hearty again, even . . . .

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