

Literature, &c.

SPEAK NOT HARSHLY.

SPEAK not harshly; kind words win
Their way to hearts sternest mould;
Though fenced about with mail of sin,
To angel words they must unfold.

Think'st thou they are used in vain?
Think'st thou they're thrown away?
As soon believe mild April rain
No beauty lends to flowers of May.

Speak not harshly; never grieve
A bosom by an unkind tone;
Kind words the sweetest chaplets weave,
And half their fragrance is our own?

Speak not harshly; our sad world
Would now far more of Eden show
Were lips with harsh words never
curl'd,
But only did with kindness glow,

Speak not harshly; all the stars,
And all the flowers of every hue,
Sing unto man in kindest airs
A language beautiful and true.

Speak not harshly; shall we fling
A shadow over any heart,
Or crush one blossom of its spring
With words that kill like poisoned dart?

No! let's kindly speak to all;
As swift we cross o'er life's lone sea,
The storms which must our bark befall
To bear not half so hard will be.

NEW WORKS.

THE MISSING LETTER.

By the Author of 'Philip and Millicent Crane.'

A few days after this, Higham's great market was held, the first in the new year. Amongst other farmers who attended it was Mr Sterling. About three o'clock in the afternoon, when his business was over, he went into the post-office. Mr Grame and his son were both there, the latter sitting down and reading a newspaper.—It was not a busy hour.

'Good day, Mr Grame,' said the farmer.—'Good day, Master Walter. I have come about that letter. I do think it must be lost. It never was so late before, that I recollect.'

'What letter?' enquired Mr Grame.—'Why, that letter—with my fifty pounds in it. I don't expect any other. You are sure you have not overlooked it?'

'The letter! It went to Layton days ago,' responded Mr Grame. 'Have you not received it?'

Farmer Stirling's eyes opened wide with perplexity, and his mouth also. 'Went to Layton days ago!' he uttered at length, 'where is it, then?'

'If you had not had it, there must be some mismanagement at the Layton office. But such neglect is unusual with Mr Marsh.'

'Good a mercy! I hope it has never been stole.'

'Which morning was it the letter came Walter?' cried Mr Grame, appealing to his son. 'Oh—I remember—the day you and the girls were going over. It was the very morning of your wife's ball, Mr Sterling.'

'The morning afore, or the morning after?' asked the bewildered farmer.

'The same morning, the 6th of January. When Walter and the two girls went over in the evening.'

'Now why didn't you tell me it was come, Mr Walter?' expostulated the farmer.

'I never thought of it,' replied the young man. 'And if I had thought of it, it would only have been to suppose you had received it. You ought to have had it that afternoon. Had you happened to mention it, I could have told you it was come.'

'Now look at that!' groaned the farmer.

'What with the kick up that night, the smoking, and the eating and the drinking, I'm blest if I didn't cast care to the winds, and the letter never came into my head at all. Are you quite sure, Mr Grame, that it was the very letter?'

'I am sure that it was a letter addressed to you, and that it came from London. I made the remark to Walter that your letter was come at last. I have not the slightest doubt it was the letter.'

'And you sent it on to Layton?'

'Of course I did.'

'But Anne called in at the post-office yesterday, and old Marsh assured her there was nothing of the sort arrived for me.'

'I put it into the Layton bag myself, and secured it myself, as I always do,' returned Mr Grame, 'and the bag was never out of my hands till I delivered it to John Ledbitter. My son was present and saw me put it in.'

'I did,' said Walter. 'When my father exclaimed that your letter was come at last, Mr Sterling, I looked over his shoulder at the address, and I saw him drop it into the bag. They must have overlooked at the Layton office.'

'Old Marsh is such a careful body,' debated the farmer.

'He is,' assented Mr Grame. I don't suppose he ever overlooked a letter in his life. Still such a thing may occur. Go to the office as soon as you return, Mr Sterling, and tell him for me that the letter went on to Layton.'

'It's a jolly vexatious thing to have all this bother. If that £50 note's gone, it's my loss. Selina's father never wanted to send 'em through the post-office, but I told him I'd run the risk.'

And perhaps here lay the secret of Farmer Sterling's anxiety about the safe arrival of these letters—because he knew that the money's being forwarded in this way was in defiance of the opinion of everybody.

The letter never reached Layton—so old Mr Marsh affirmed, when applied to by the farmer. He remembered perfectly the 6th—why it was not a week ago—the day he told Ledbitter of the accident to the bay mare. No soul but himself touched the letters; nobody was present that day when he opened the bag, and he could swear that the letter for Farmer Sterling was not in it. Mr Marsh's words was a guarantee in itself; he held the situation two score years, and was perfectly trustworthy.

So the suspicion fell upon John Ledbitter. Indeed, it may not be too much to say that the guilt was traced home to him. 'The postmasters of Higham and Layton were known, tried public servants, above all suspicion; the one had put the letter in, and secured the bag; the other, when he opened the bag, found the letter gone: and none did or could have access to the bag between those times but John Ledbitter. He was dismissed from his situation as driver, but, strange to say, he was not brought to trial. Farmer Sterling declined to prosecute—he warn't a going into a court o' justice after keeping out of 'em all his life, not he—and no instructions were received on the subject from the government; but John Ledbitter's guilt was as surely brought home to him as it could have been by twelve jurymen. Of course he protested his innocence—what man, under a similar accusation, does not?—but his crime was too palpable. Neither the letter nor its enclosure could be traced. Mr Cleave furnished the particulars of the lost note, and it was stopped at the London and country banks, handbills describing it were also hung up in the different public-houses; but it was never presented for payment, and was never heard of. 'Saucy Sir must have eat it up with his hay,' quoth the joking farmers of Layton, one to another; but if they accidentally met the gentleman-driver—as they were wont to style John Ledbitter—they regarded him with an aspect very different from a joking one.

John Ledbitter never entered Mr Stirling's house but once, after the committal of the crime, and that was to resign Selina Cleave; to release her from the tacit engagement which existed between them. However, he found there was little necessity for his doing it: Selina released herself. He arrived at the Hill House for this purpose at an inopportune moment, for his rival—as he certainly aspired to be—was there before him.

It was Sunday, and when the farmer and his family got home from church in the morning, they found Walter Grame there, who had ridden over from Higham. He received an invitation to remain and partake of their roast griskin and apple-pie. Pigmeat, fed at Farmer Sterling's, was not to be despised, neither was apple-pie, made by Anne. After dinner the farmer took his pipe, his wife lay back in her cushioned arm-chair on the opposite side of the fire, and while Anne presided over the wine—cowsnip and port, a bottle of the latter decanted in compliment to their guest—he watched Selina Cleave. The conversation turned upon John Ledbitter and his crime.

'I do not see how he should have accomplished it,' exclaimed Mrs Sterling, 'unless he stopped the mail cart, and undid the bag on the road.'

'Well, what was there to prevent him doing so?' responded the farmer.

'But such a deliberate theft,' repeated Mrs Sterling. 'I can understand—at least, I think I can—being overtaken by a moment of temptation, but a man who could stop his horse on a public road, unlock the box, and untie the bag for the purpose of robbing it, must be one that would stand at no crime of similar nature.'

'Why that's just what I told him,' cried the farmer, 'when he comes to me at Higham, a wanting to excuse himself, and make believe he was innocent. What's gone with the letter and the money,' I said, 'if you have not got it? And that shut up his mouth; for all he could bring out was, that he wished he knew what had gone with it.'

'Ah,' broke in Walter Grame, Ledbitter went down amazingly with some toils, but I scented the rascal in him. And Higham never noticed, till now, the singularity of his having taken to drive a mail-cart.'

The farmer took his pipe from his lips. 'As how, Master Walter?'

'Did any one ever before hear of a gentleman—as Ledbitter may be termed—accepting a menial office, only suited to a postboy, under the plea of keeping himself from idleness? Trash! It is the opinion in Higham that the robbery was planned when he took the place.'

'What, to crib that same identical letter of

mine?' gasped the farmer, laying his pipe on his knee, while a startled look of dismay rose to Anne Sterling's face.

'Not yours in particular, Mr Sterling. But probably yours happened to be the first letter that presented itself to my gentleman, as bearing any enclosure worth the risk.'

'The villain! the double-faced rascal!' uttered the farmer. 'That's putting the matter—and him too—in a new light.'

At that moment Molly entered the room with some silver spoons, large and small, and shut the door behind her.

'It's he,' she abruptly said, coming up to the table, with a face of terror. 'He says he wants to see Miss Selina.'

'Who?' demanded everybody, in a breath.

'That dreadful Ledbitter. He came a sneaking in at the kitchen door; not the front way, or you'd have seen him from this window, but right across the fowl-yard. I was took all of a heap, and axed if he'd walk into the parlor, for I was afeard on him. 'No,' says he, 'I'll not go in. Is Miss Cleave there?'

'Yes, she is,' I said, 'and Missis, and Miss Anne, and Master, and Mr Walter Grame; and Joan's close at hand a skimming the cream.' For I thought he should know as I warn't alone in the place, if he should be come to take anything.'

'Molly,' says he, quite humbly, 'go in and ask Miss Cleave if she will step out and speak a word with me.' So I grabbed up the spoons, which, by ill luck, was a lying on the table, and away I come.'

Miss Cleave rose from her chair.

'Selina!' said Mrs Sterling, in a reproving tone.

'Aunt,' was her rejoinder, 'I have also a word to say to him.'

'But my dear! Well, well, just for a minute, if you must. But remember, Selina, we cannot again admit Mr Ledbitter to the house.'

'I'd as lieve admit the public hangman,' roared the farmer.

Scarcely had Selina Cleave left the room, when Walter Grame darted after her. He drew her, with the hand of authority, it seemed, into the best parlor, the door of which, adjacent to their sitting room, stood open.

'Miss Cleave! Selina! you will never accord an interview to this man?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'For the last time.'

'Good heavens, what infatuation! Don't you believe in his guilt?'

'Is it possible to disbelieve it,' she murmured, looking wretchedly ill, and also wretchedly cross. 'But upon the terms we were, a last interview, a final understanding is necessary.'

'What terms?' he savagely uttered. 'It cannot be that you were engaged to him?'

'Not engaged. But—'

'But what? Trust me as a friend, Selina.'

'Had it not been for this, had Ledbitter remained what he ought, we should have been.'

'I am grieved to hear it. It is a lucky escape for you.'

'Oh and it is this which makes me so angry,' she bitterly exclaimed. 'Why did he monopolise my society, seek to make me like him, when he knew himself to be a base, bad man. 'I, who might have chosen from all the world! Let me go Mr Grame: I shall be more myself when this is over.'

'You can have nothing to say to him now, but what may be said through a third party,' he persisted, still holding her. 'Suffer me to see him for you.'

'Nonsense,' she peevishly answered. 'You cannot say what I have to say.'

She broke from him, and walked, with a hasty step, along the passage. He did not dare to follow her, but, to judge by his looks, he would have liked it, and to have boxed her ears as well. The two servants were whispering in the kitchen, but Selina could see no signs of Mr Ledbitter. Molly pointed to the door of the best kitchen, and Selina entered.

Standing in the middle of the cold, comfortable room his eyes fixed on the entrance, as if waiting for her, was John Ledbitter. She walked up, and confronting him without speaking, her action and countenance expressing both anger and scorn.

'I see,' began Mr Ledbitter, as he looked at her. 'I need not have come from Higham to do my errand this afternoon. It has been done for me.'

'I feel it cold in this room,' said Selina, glancing round, and striving, pretty successfully, to hide the agitation she really felt, under a show of indifference. 'Be so good as to tell me your business—that I may return to the fire.'

'My business was, partly to see how this accusation had affected you towards me; I see it too plainly now. Had it been otherwise—'

He stopped: either from emotion, or from a loss how to express himself. But she stood as still as a post, and did not help him on.

'Then I have only to say farewell,' he resumed, 'and to thank you for the many happy hours we have spent together. I came to say something else, but no matter; I see now it would be useless.'

'And I beg,' she said, raising herself up, 'that you will forget those hours you speak of, and which I shall never reflect on but with a sense of degradation. I blush—I blush,' she

repeated vehemently, 'to think that the world may point to me, as I pass through the streets, and say, 'There goes she who was engaged to the felon, John Ledbitter!' I pray that I may never see your face again.'

'You never shall—by my seeking. Should I ever hold converse with you again, willingly, it will be under different auspices.'

He quitted the room, stalked through the kitchen, and across the fold-yard into the side-lane, his breast heaving with passionate anger, for she had aroused all the lion within him. Molly and the dairymaid pressed their noses against the kitchen window, and stared after him till he was beyond view, like they might have stared had some extraordinary foreign animal been on exhibition there, and with quite as much curiosity. Whilst Selina Cleave, repelling some softer emotions, which seemed inclined to make themselves felt within her, strove to shake John Ledbitter out of her thoughts, and to say to herself, as she returned to the sitting room, that she had shaken him out of them for ever.

The years passed on, nearly two, and the postmaster at Higham was stricken with mortal illness. His disease was a lingering one, lasting over several months, during which he was confined to his bed, and his son managed the business. One evening, just before his death, Walter was sitting in the room, when the old man suddenly addressed him.

'Walter,' he said, 'I shall soon be gone, and after that they will make you postmaster. Be steady, punctual, diligent in your daily business, as I trust I have been; be just and merciful in your dealings with your fellow-men, as I have striven to be; be more urgent in serving your Maker, for there the very best of us fall short. You have been a dutiful son to me, a good son, and I pray that, in return, your children, in your old age, may be such to you.'

Mr Walter fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

'There is only one thing in business matters which causes me regret for the past,' resumed Mr Grame—'that the particulars connected with John Ledbitter's theft should never have come to light. It is a weight on my conscience, having suffered him to assume a post for which his position unfitted him. If he sought it with the intention of doing wrong, my having refused him the situation would have removed the temptation from his way.'

'You need not worry yourself over that, father,' responded the younger man. 'A fellow bent upon crime, as Ledbitter must have been, if he does not find opportunity in one way, will seek it in another. If there's anything to be regretted in the matter it is the not having brought him to punishment; he ought to have been made to stand his trial, and despatched out of the country. The thing would have been done with then, and have gone out of men's minds.'

'He has had his punishment,' replied Mr Grame.

'Abandoned by his relations, scorned by his friends, shunned by all good men, and driven to get his living in the fields as a day laborer! Many a man would have sunk under it.'

'I cannot think why the fool stops in Highamshire. If he would be off to a distant part, whether county or kingdom, where his crime was unknown, he might get up in the world again.'

'No harsh names, Walter,' interrupted the father; 'John Ledbitter did not offend against you. Leave him to the stings of his own conscience.'

Mr Walter Grame muttered something which did not reach the sickbed, and quitted the room. It was irksome to him to remain in it long. He was absent about an hour, and, during this period, Mr Grame dropped asleep, and dreamt a very vivid dream. So vivid, that in the first moments of waking up, he could not be persuaded but it was reality. The coloring his thoughts had taken was no doubt imparted by the previous conversation. He dreamt that John Ledbitter was innocent; he did not see or understand how, but in his sleep he felt the most solemn conviction that the fact was so.

'Walter, Walter,' he gasped forth, after his confused relation of it, 'when his innocence is brought to light, do try and make it up to him. I would, if I were alive.'

'When his innocence—what do you mean, sir? You must be asleep still. A dream is but a dream.'

'Well—if it comes to light, if it shall be proved that he is an injured man, do you endeavor to compensate him for the injustice that has been heaped on his head. IT IS A CHARGE I LEAVE YOU.'

'The old man is wandering,' whispered Mr Walter to the nurse, who was then present; and it was through her that this dream of the postmaster's got talked of in Higham, though not for long afterwards. 'Let me give you your composing draught, sir.'

A goodly company went wending their way to Layton church, for the fairest flower in Layton parish was that day to be taken out of it. A stranger, who happened to be passing through Layton, stepped into the church with the crowd.