



A watch-man.

YOUNG MASTER BEN.

A Village Story.

BY MISS MITFORD.

It was about seven o'clock one evening in the last Christmas week, that I was sitting alone in our little parlour, with my feet on the fender, my dog Dash reclining against my knee (I beg Dash's pardon for having reckoned him as nobody), a glowing fire before me, and an apple roasting on the hob, — doing nothing, unless occasionally turning the apple or patting Dash's beautiful head may be accounted doings, — and entirely immersed in that perfection of lazy comfort — that piece of dreamy delight yclept a reverie.

There was, too, that additional zest to the enjoyment of in-door warmth and comfort which is derived from the effect of strong contrast without. The weather was what is usually and most expressively termed — bitter. Snow lay deep on the ground, and the dark cloudy sky gave token that the first interval of calm would produce another fall. At the moment of which I speak, the wind was too high even for a snow-storm; the fierce north-east howled amain, and the icy bushes in the hedge-rows rattled and crackled in the tempest, whilst the large boughs of the trees creaked like the masts of a ship at sea. It is strange that these noises, betokening so much misery to the poor wretches doomed to wander abroad, should add to the sense of snugness and security at home; — but so it is! The selfishness, however unamiable, is too general to be ashamed of, or even to lament over; and perhaps a silent thankfulness for one's own superior comforts may tend to throw into the feeling that portion of good which will generally be found in the inward meditations of every human being not absolutely wicked; for the thoughts of an hour, as well as the actions of a life, are of mingled yarn; none, I fear, all virtuous, — few, I trust, utterly wicked.

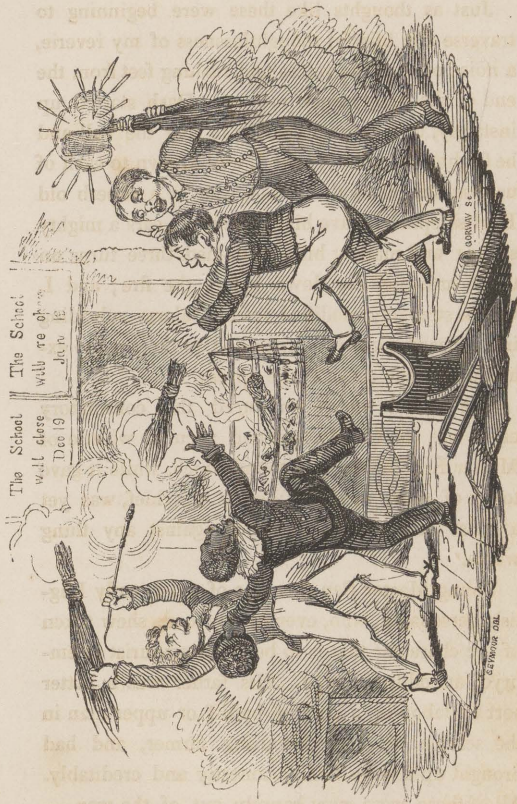
My enjoyment of that blessed state the “*far niente*” was, however, much too dreamy and vague

to permit me to analyse my own sensations. And yet my reverie was not wholly pleasurable either. We lived in the midst of the disturbed districts ; my father was at B., attending his duty (a very painful one on this occasion) as chairman of the bench ; and though I had every reason to believe that the evil spirit was subsiding, and that he was at that instant, sitting as quietly and as snugly as myself, with his friend the high sheriff and his brother magistrates in a warm, comfortable, elegant room at the Crown Inn (for happen what may, justices must dine !), or at the worst, seated by a large fire taking examinations in the council chamber at B., still no one who lived within reach of the armed peasantry, or of the exaggerated and still more frightful rumours that preceded their approach, or who had witnessed as I had done the terrific blaze of the almost nightly conflagrations, could get rid of the vague idea of danger which might arrive at any moment, especially to one notoriously and actively engaged in putting down the mischief. Our parish had remained, it is true, happily free from the contagion ; still it raged all around, east, west, north and south ; we were on a well-frequented highway, almost at the very point where four roads met, and the mobs travelled so far and so fast, that there was no telling at what hour or from what point of the compass our quiet village might be invaded.

Just as thoughts like these were beginning to traverse the blissful thoughtlessness of my reverie, a noise of shouting voices and rushing feet from the end of the street struck my ear. Dash started up instantly, and I was preparing to ring the bell and be frightened, when a sound, well known to each of us, pacified us both. Dash, who is a superb old English spaniel, gave his magnificent ears a mighty shake; and making his accustomed three turns on the hearth-rug, lay down before the fire; and I, with a strangely modified feeling, alarm subsiding into amazed curiosity, proceeded to the door to examine into the cause of the uproar.

The sound which produced this consolatory effect was the well-known and peculiar whistle of Master Ben Emery, — a sound which, while it gave token of every variety of boyish mischief, was yet a most comfortable assurance against any thing worse.

Young Master Ben was one of those truly English personages, who, even in boyhood, shew token of the character that is to be — a humourist in embryo, an oddity, a wag. His father was a better sort of labourer, a kind of bailiff or upper man in the service of a neighbouring farmer, and had brought up a large family honestly and creditably. All of these were now happily out of the way, — some at service, some in business, some married,



Breaking up, and burning Threshing Machines!

and some dead, — with the exception of Benjamin, the youngest born, his mother's darling and plague. Ben was not as a mother's darling often is — a beauty. His carrotty locks forbade any claim to that title, though he had the lively blue eye and pleasant smile which so often accompany that complexion, and cause a general resemblance, a kind of family likeness between red-haired people. In person he was a thin, stunted, dwarfish boy of fourteen, small and light enough to pass for ten, who made use of his actual age to evade a longer attendance at the charity school, the master of which, a dull personage no way fit to cope with Ben's biting jests, acquiescing in the young gentleman's own account of his scholarship purely to get rid of him; whilst his smallness of size and look of youth and debility he turned to account in another way, pleading his deficiency in bulk and stature, and general weakness and delicacy, as a reason for not going to work at the farm with his father, whose master had consented to employ him to drive the team. He weakly! Why in play or in mischief it was a pocket Hercules! has beaten big Bob the blacksmith at quoits; and thrown Titus Penwyn, the Cornish boy, in wrestling. Delicate! why if the sun or the world would but have stood still for the time, there is no doubt but he could have played at cricket for eight and forty

hours running, without requiring more pause than the usual fifteen minutes between the innings. No exercise that bore the name of sport was too much for him ; sheer labour was another matter.

Not only did he plead weakness and delicacy to escape the promotion of plough-boy at farmer Brooke's, but when hired by his father to keep Master Simmons's sheep, — an employment that seemed made for him, inasmuch as there was, for ten hours in the day, nothing to do but to lie on a bank and practise a certain pastoral flageolet with which he used to go too-tooing through the village, — he contrived to get dismissed in three days for incapacity and contumacy ; and even when proffered by his mother to look after her croney dame Welles's Welch cow, (an animal famous for getting out of bounds,) not for the lucre of gain, but simply, as she expressed it, to keep both the creatures out of mischief, his services were rejected by the prudent dame with the observation, that 'obstropolous and wild as her beast might be, Ben was incomparably the most unmanageable of the two' — a proof of bad reputation which so enraged his father, that he only escaped a sound flogging by climbing up a tree like a squirrel, and sleeping all night in the coppice amidst the fern and the bushes.

It was the very day after this misadventure, that Ben contrived to attach himself to our little es-

tablishment as a sort of help to our boy John. How he managed nobody can tell, for all the house knew him and his character, and every body in it held him for the very incarnation of mischief; but here he is, in prime favour with every one, not regularly paid and hired to be sure, but receiving sufficient and comfortable wages in the shape of pretty constant dinners and suppers, frequent largesses of sixpences and shillings, and occasional doles of wearing apparel. I question whether he be not more expensive to our small household than that model of a boy John himself. Having said this, it is but right to add that he is nearly as useful in his own wild way; will do any thing on earth that he thinks can serve or please, especially if he be not ordered to do it (for he has a Sir-John-Falstaff-like aversion to compulsion); makes himself in one way or other agreeable to the whole family — always excepting a certain undermaid called Betsy, against whom he has a spite; and although renowned all over the parish for story-telling, a peccadillo which I really believe he cannot help, never takes any of us in (for we know him so well that we never dream of believing him), unless now and then when he happens to speak truth, which has the same effect in deceiving his hearers as falsehood from other people.

We keep Ben because we like him. Why he

came to us, heaven knows ! Perhaps for the same reason ; perhaps to avoid the flogging which roosting in the coppice had delayed, but not averted ; perhaps attracted by a clever jay of mine, now, alas ! no more — a bird of great accomplishment, and almost as saucy as himself ; perhaps for the chance of handling a certain gun which he had seen John cleaning, an implement of noise and mischief that just suits his fancy, and which he brandishes of a night about the garden, pretending to hear thieves ; perhaps to ride a fine young horse of our's which nobody else can ride, for he is an excellent horseman, and with his quick wit and light weight, seems born for a jockey ; perhaps, and this is the likeliest cause of all, to have opportunity for playing tricks on poor Betsy, whom neither I nor my maid Anne, and I believe she tries all in her power, can protect from his elvish machinations. But that very day had he spoilt my dinner (most unintentionally as far as his design went) by throwing a snow-ball at her as she stood by the kitchen fire, which, from her suddenly starting aside to avoid the missile, alighted on the back of a fowl in the act of being roasted, which was thereby rendered totally uneatable. This feat had of course brought him into great disgrace in the lower regions ; and since half past five, when the misadventure took place, nothing had been seen or

heard of the young gentleman till now that his repeated and well-known whistle gave token of his vicinity.

Immediately after Ben's whistle, another sound was heard in the *melée*, rising from amidst the tramp of feet bounding along the frosty path from which the snow had been swept, the shouts and cries of children escaping and punished, and the distant tinkling of a bell, another well-known sound—the loud, gruff, angry voice of Master Clarke, the parish beadle.

This worthy functionary was a person who, an enemy to mischievous boys, by virtue of his office, had contrived to render his post and his person peculiarly obnoxious to that small rabble of the village, of whom Ben might be considered the ring-leader, by a sour stern severity of aspect and character, an unrelenting aversion to frolic or pastime of any sort, and an alacrity in pursuing and punishing the unhappy culprits, which came in strong contrast with his usual stolid slowness of act and word. Of course Master Clarke could not fail to be unpopular; and the mingled noises of his voice and of the bell reminded me that that very morning he had been to our house to inform his Worship that every night, as soon as he sate down to supper, his shop-bell had been rung and rung and rung, not by profitable customers, but by some invisible

enemies, boys of course, whom he was determined to catch, if catch he could, and to punish with all the severity of his rod of office. His Worship, an indulgent and kindly personage, heard his complaints, and smiled and shook his head, and even threw away upon him a little of that unprofitable commodity called good advice! — “Boys will be boys, Master Clarke,” said he; “you were one once, and so was I. Better leave the bell unanswered for a night or two; take no notice, and depend on it they ’ll soon tire of their frolic.”

This recollection, which came across me as I passed from the door of the parlour to the door of the hall, completely enlightened me as to the cause of the uproar; and I was prepared to see, by the pale cold dim snow-light Master Clarke, with a screaming struggling urchin in either hand, little Dick Wilson, poor fellow! who has but just donned the doublet and hose, and Sam Sewell, who is still in petticoats, in full chase of the larger fry who were flying before his fury, whilst Master Ben was lying perdu in a corner of our court, under shadow of the wall which he had contrived to leap or to scramble over. The sound of the distant ringing seemed to augment with every stride that Master Clarke took, who, half maddened with that noise, and with a sudden whistle which Ben again sent forth from his hiding-place under the wall



Harm watch, harm catch!

suddenly abandoned his pursuit, and was making for our gate, when all at once the man — one of the largest proportions, colossal, gigantic! — seemed pulled back with a mighty jerk by some invisible cause, and was laid prostrate and sprawling in the snowy kennel. Ben jumped on the wall, the better to survey and laugh at him, as Puck might do to Bottom, and the rest of the crew dancing with shouts of triumph round their fallen enemy, like the make-believe fairies round Falstaff in the guise of Herne the Hunter. The cause of this downfall was soon discovered to be a strong cord tied at one end to Master Clarke's coat, at the other to the bell at his shop door — but how fastened, or by whom, this deponent saith not. Betsy, indeed, avers, that the cord much resembles one which she herself missed that very evening from John and Ben's bedstead; and the beadle hath his own suspicions; but as no certain proof could be obtained, Master Ben hath escaped scot-free!