The New Bloomfield, Pa. Times.

VOL. XV. NEW BLOOMFIELD, PA., TUESDAY, DECEMBER 27, 1881. NO. 52.

THE TIMES.

An Independent Family Newspaper,
IS PUBLISHED EVERY TUESDAY BY

F. MORTIMER & CO.

TERMS:
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$1.50 PER YEAR, POSTAGE FREE.
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Pretty Jane and the Pedlar.

CONCLUDED.

THUS assuming a cheerfulness which she did not feel, she affectionately kissed the cold cheek of the trembling girl, and leading her into the little chamber, begged her to try to sleep. But as she closed the door, she looked back, and saw that Jane had seated herself on the floor beneath the window, and was rocking herself to and fro, with her head bent down to her knees, in the moonlight which glimmered through the half drawn curtains into the room.

The widow then retired to her own apartment, but several hours passed and she was still awake. for ever and anon a moan, distinctly audible through the thin board partition, reached her ear. About midnight, however, she had sunk into a slight slumber, when a shriek of thrilling sharpness aroused her. She sprang from her bed, and opened the communicating door between the two chambers. Jane still sat where she had left her, with her dress unchanged, except that she had thrown the scarf over her flaxen curls, and held it closely folded upon her breast. She made no reply to the hurried inquiry of her foster mother, but with one of her pale, slender fingers she pointed convulsively to the window.

The widow looked cautiously out. "I see nothing, dear," said she; "you must have fallen asleep and been dreaming of something to alarm you. There is no unusual sound—stay—I think a shadow did pass along the porch, but it may have been the wind stirring the long branches of the willow, yet the night is calm. What was it you saw Jane?"

But though the cold sweat glistened on the forehead of Jane, and her teeth chattered as if with an ague, she returned no answer.

"You should not allow yourself to be so overcome with fear, dear child," resumed Widow Slade; "we are so close to the road that it would be strange if stragglers should not be sometimes tempted to look in upon us. Yet our bolts and bars have always kept us safe from the ill-intentioned, if any such came near us, and they would be sufficient now. But come, you must sit here no longer. I will draw the curtains close, and watch by you till your fright is over."

She unwound the scarf from the shoulders of Jane, and laid it in a drawer, and then, after removing the remainder of her dress, without any assistance of her own, led her in the same passiveness to her bed.

The widow returned to her own chamber no more that night. She lighted a candle and placed it at a distance from the bed, but she could see by it, when she took her seat at the bedside, that the tears were rolling fast from between the closed eyelids of Jane. Still she could elicit no explanation, for there was nothing to satisfy her in the few unconnected words which were always returned to her anxious questions. Toward morning she ceased to weep, her countenance grew more haggard, she gesticulated wildly, and in indescribable alarm, her foster mother despatched a message, by the first passing neighbor, to the physician of the settlement. Hours, however, must have elapsed before the summons could be answered, and the widow, who was skilled in simples, went out to select, from her garden stores, such medicinal herbs as she believed efficacious in nervous disorders, for of that nature she presumed Jane's malady to be. She was arrested in her task by the abrupt entrance of a neighbor, a carpenter, who had been employed in the repairs of the parsonage.

"Let me sit down, neighbor Slade," said he, grasping a bar of trellis, and throwing himself on a border of myrtle; "I have just seen a sight that makes me as weak as a child."

"Why, Davis, man, you are ill, come into the house, or let me bring you out a bowl of water," said the widow, with kind solicitude.

"No, no, stop, my breath has come back again and I can tell you now; but first—have you heard nothing from the old house yonder?" pointing to the parsonage.

"Certainly not; what was there to be heard?"

"It's an unlucky house, and I have seen in it what will go far to break the heart of poor Jane. I was a boy when I saw her mother lying there, stiff and frozen, but the sight was nothing like this—frightful—frightful! I went after sunrise to take away some tools I had left in the kitchen, and not knowing who had the key, I thought I would get in at one of the cellar windows—I had myself hung the wooden shutter so that it could be opened from the outside. I jumped down, and stumbled on what I supposed to be a log lying against the wall. To save myself from falling I stretched down my hand toward the ground, and it struck upon the clay-cold face of a dead body!

"But hear the worst, hear the worst!" he proceeded, after the interruption of Widow Slade's loud ejaculation of horror; "it was our young minister—it was Lewis Walton!—don't give way now, neighbor Slade;" and he grasped her arm, for her limbs seemed to be failing her; "you have seen sorrowful and terrible sights in your time. and all your strength is now needed to keep up the heart of that poor young creature who will feel the blow the heaviest. I could hardly believe my own senses, but the light came in strongly at the window I had left open, and there could be no mistake. I hurried up the stairs, and saw through the entry, and on the door step, daubs of clotted blood. He must have been murdered—brutally murdered—and the body must have been carried through the house, though the door was locked and the key gone—good Heavens!—can that be Jane, and could she have heard me?"

The livid face of Jane was protruded through the window, with eyes bloodshot, and a ghastly smile upon the lips.

"Go in, Jane, go to your bed, darling," said the widow, prompted to suppress her own emotion by the necessity of using all her firmness of mind for the support of her hapless ward, whose singular ailment she briefly described to the visitor.

The man listened with something of awe. "Depend upon it, neighbor," said he, "she has had warning of this; it is not a mere girl's sorrow after a lover she expects to see in a week; she has had some token of his death—perhaps she has seen his spirit. There must have been some reason for her scream in the night, and what living thing would have frightened her speechless?"

He arose to carry his startling tale further, and as he lifted his hat which he had thrown upon the myrtle vines, he saw beneath it a large key pressing down the dark-green leaves. "Why, here's one of the strangest things of all, neighbor Slade," said he; "can you tell me how this came here?"

"I cannot, indeed; to my knowledge I never saw the key before. It does not belong here, for our doors all fasten with bolts and screw latches."

"It is the key of the parsonage," said the carpenter. "I have had it in my house day after day, since I undertook the repairs, and I know it well. This leather loop I tied in the ring with my own hands; it was but yesterday I parted with it, and then I gave it up to Lewis Walton himself."

"And this, is it yours?" asked the widow, pointing to a handkerchief which hung by a slight hold on a bush against the fence, as if it had accidentally fallen upon it.

"That?—no, a man's silk handkerchief—don't you know it?"

"No more than I did the key; it is new and unhemmed, yet it has been used."

"There is blood upon it!" exclaimed the man; "those dark, stiff spots are blood! It must have come here with the key; it looks as if you had been in danger too, neighbor Slade; the villains must have dropped the things as they climbed the fence, for you keep your gate locked, I believe."

The widow shuddered. "Then Jane's alarm in the night may not have been from her own fancy," said she; "there, take the handkerchief, Davis, along with the key. You may be able to do more with such proofs than I could."

The ill tidings flew as only such can fly. The whole country round was filled with grief and horror. Hundreds collected at the parsonage through mingled curiosity and regard for the memory of the unfortunate young pastor, and among the crowds that constantly filled the road, poor Jane received a full proportion of sympathy and commiseration. The story of her strange malady was soon circulated with the customary amount of exaggeration, and was speculated upon by many with superstitious wonder. She remained in her chamber during the day, and her foster mother remarked that the unusual bustle in the house, occasioned by the continual coming and going of the kind-hearted and the inquisitive, failed to draw from her a single question, rational or otherwise. The only words that escaped her lips were the monotonous "Oh, nothing, nothing!" uttered with a melancholy wildness that made the listeners tremble.

Night came, and once more alone, the widow collected her thought, and attempted to devise some means of impressing the mind so mysteriously impaired. She drew a little table to the bedside, and taking down from its shelf the old bible which she had taught Jane to treasure as the most precious relic of her departed mother, she commenced reading in a low, calm voice, such passages as, in her lively faith, she trusted could not strike ineffectually upon her ear. Whilst she was thus earnestly engaged, she heard the slow tramp of an approaching horse and then the sound of heavy footsteps around the house. She paused to listen. A door faintly creaked, and she saw the eyes of Jane, which had appeared fixed on vacancy, dilate to an unnatural fullness, and suddenly from her palid lips burst forth the same thrilling scream, that the night before had aroused her from her pillow. She looked round in affright, and beheld her son close behind her.

"Hush, mother!" he exclaimed, with rapid utterance, "you must hide me, and instantly; you refused me money yesterday to pay my debts, and now the constables are at my heels. Try to do something to serve me now."

He had opened the door of his mother's chamber, and was about to pass into it, he turned quickly and threw himself under the bed on which the young sufferer lay, muttering, "If there's a safe place, it is here."

Then came a loud rap on the door, and to the tremulous answer of the widow, Mr. Merrill, the sheriff of the county, presented himself.

"Do not let me alarm you, good Mistress Slade," said he, after a brief salutation bespeaking an old friend; "but circumstances, which I will afterward explain, render it proper that I should search your premises. There is an outbuilding connected with your house which I wish to look into. Will you furnish me with lights, and, if not inconvenient, oblige me by leading the way? There is an inside door, is there not?—this open one, I believe;" and as pale and silent she complied with his request, he added, kindly, "pray let me assure you, you have no cause for personal apprehension of any kind."

The out house alluded to was one adjoining the main building, serving, in the lower part, as a woodshed, and above, as a repository for various kinds of lumber. The sheriff looked carefully about the neatly arranged woodpiles, and then, after ascending the steep stairs, as carefully among the spinning-wheels, the reels, the barrels and bundles, and other articles which generally comprise the store of a farm-house garret.

"All appears as it should be," remarked Mr. Merrill: "I presume you have observed nothing which would indicate there having been an unusual occupant in the place?"

"Nothing, excepting this," returned the trembling woman; "these bundles of wool and flax have always been kept hanging to the joists!"

"And now they are laid together on the floor, as if they had been so arranged for a bed," rejoined Mr. Merrill, turning the bundles over, but without finding any thing extraneous among them, and as they ascended the stairs and entered the sitting-room he continued; "to explain the reason of my visit, which seems to have agitated you much more than I could have apprehended, it is this. After the attempt I made during the forenoon to investigate the horrible occurrence at the parsonage, I rode on toward N—, and from a neighbor of yours, whom I chanced to meet on his return from there, I learned that as he passed this in the middle of the night on his way to market, he had seen a man climb into the window of the woodshed. That circumstance, in connection with the finding of the key and the handkerchief, induced me to believe that their possessor had made your premises a place of concealment for a longer or shorter time, unaccountable as it would seem that he should do so, and I regarded it as my duty to come hither without delay, and make an examination which would satisfy me as to whether he had left further proofs behind him. Several persons of the neighborhood, who were present when he made his communication, have accompanied me to know the result, and, at a notion of their own, that he might have hidden himself in the loft, waiting for the cover of the night to travel further, have stationed themselves around the house to stop him if I should disturb him in his stolen quarters."

The sheriff paused as he laid his hand on the door, and looked back to inquire, "How is Jane, our poor, Pretty Jane?—have you seen any change in her for the better?"

"None in the least."

"Poor child! poor child! her singular illness has undoubtedly some relation to this deplorable transaction, and my strongest hope of detecting the perpetrator rests upon her recovery." He took leave, and after the tramp of his horse and the voices of his companions had died in the distance, George Slade reappeared from his place of concealment.

"So then, I have had my alarm for nothing;" said he, with a forced laugh; "but when a man has got himself into difficulties it makes him cowardly, and I'm very well satisfied not to have been the object of pursuit. But you must give me something to eat, for I am again in a hurry to be gone."

Without waiting for his mother to place refreshments on the table as she proposed, he opened a large corner cupboard in which they were contained, and ate voraciously. "I should not have felt pleasant to be locked up for want of a little money, particularly after my own mother had refused to save me from it;" he proceeded, and looking at her sharply, he asked, "was the money returned which you gave to that unlucky young preacher?—was it found about him?"

"No, George, that must have been the temptation to the wicked deed, for Lewis Walton had no enemies. Of course the body was robbed;" and sighing to think of the cold avarice of her son, which she believed caused him to allude thus to an event which she regarded with such deep distress, she continued; "but I have a considerable sum that I can now let you have, since the expenses for which it was intended will not be incurred. I fear I may not be doing right to give it to you, but my mind is troubled and I cannot think clearly. If you can get yourself a good name by it, you are welcome to it; if not, do not let it sink you still deeper into evil courses."

She withdrew to her chamber, and after some minutes returned full of surprise, perplexity and alarm. "It is gone," said she, "stolen from my chest. But yesterday I had it in my hands, and now it has disappeared."

"Pshaw!—you have only changed your mind, mother; returned George, with affected incredulity, and then, as if satisfied by her grave silence, he observed. "well, this comes of withholding your substance from your own flesh and blood, to bestow it upon strangers. But since you can do nothing for me, I had better be off. You may as well keep to yourself that you have seen me, for I owe some scores in the neighborhood, that I don't care to be reminded of just now."

Was it strange that during the successive incidents of that day, no thought of the implication of George in the hidden deed it had brought to light, should have entered the mind of the widow? *She was his mother*, and what mother, without proofs palpable as her own sense of existence, could suspect of so foul a crime the child of her own bosom! But for several minutes after his departure she stood in earnest and sad reflection, for in the acknowledgment of his irregular life afforded by his recent alarm, there was sufficient to make her heart still heavier.

When she returned to Jane, she saw in her a startling change. Her body seemed to have sunk as well as her mind, and she lay in a state of suspended animation that fearfully resembled death. She hurriedly resorted to such restoratives as were at hand, and when her efforts had partially succeeded, she remembered a bottle of perfumed essence, then too rare for common use, which had long been kept hoarded among the little trinkets and other valued ornaments of the invalid. She opened a drawer to search for it, and, among its various contents, she moved aside the scarf which she had, herself, thrown into it the night before. As she did so her eye was caught by a large, dark red stain on the snowy silk, so peculiarly defined, that in an irresistible impulse she drew it to the light. It was the impress, distinct even to the minute lines in the skin, of a human hand—the hand, with its shrunken and mutilated fore-finger, of George Slade.

Vain would be the use of words to describe the feelings of the heart-struck mother. The different circumstances of which she had been cognizant, tending to support the horrible evidence before her, flashed across her memory with the rapidity and vividness of lightning—her conversation with George on his visit of the evening before, his importunity for money, his abrupt departure, his unexplained absence and stealthy return. She could now comprehend the state of poor Jane, who must have been a witness of the fatal rencontre, and amidst her agonizing conviction, she could appreciate the forbearance of the devoted girl in smothering the natural expression of her own horror and woe to conceal from her the guilt of her son. But her lifelong habit of seeking relief in religious communion did not fail her now, and throwing herself on her knees, she remained in silent supplication, it might have been for hours, for she took no note of time. When she arose, she laid herself by the side of Jane, whose insensibility seemed to have terminated in that of a heavy sleep, and the next morning she was found, by the harvesters of her little demesne, in a low fever, from which there seemed much to apprehen

The sleep of Jane lasted until late in the morning, and when she awoke from it, her mind seemed to be recovering its tone. She, indeed, spoke to no one, but she was partially conscious of what was passing around her. This was apparent immediately on her waking, for she gazed intently on the haggard face pillowed beside her own, passed her hands over it, and laying her head on the aching heart of her foster mother, wept with the abandonment of a little child.

Widow Slade's illness increased, and as she rapidly sank, the governing affection of Jane's being resumed its ascendancy. Though able in a day or two to move about the cottage, she seldom left the bedside of her mother, but, with her watchful eyes fixed upon her face, sat holding her hands in a drooping and speechless melancholy, which seemed to evince that her filial anxiety had abstracted her from any other source of sorrow.

But the hours of the widow were numbered. No efforts could subdue her disease, and in answer to her own direct and solemn demand, she was told that human skill was no longer of avail. She requested to be left alone with Jane, and broke the communication to her with gentle calmness. "Yes, Jane," said she, "I must die, and let me go without the pain of seeing you grieve. Think, dear child, where is there mercy like that which promises to the weary and heavy laden soul a rest in the bosom of its Redeemer? Jane, Jane, look in my face—you will not grieve for me?"

"Oh, no, my mother dear!" answered