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FATHER MERRILL
ISRAEL P. WARREN,
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FATHER MERRILL.

True godliness is rarest grace
And rarest honor given;
The life that is it glorifies,
The life to come makes heaven.

BY

MARY DWINELL CHELLIS,

AUTHOR OF "DEACON SIMS' PRAYERS," "MOLLY'S BIBLE,"
"EFFIE WINGATE'S WORK," ETC.



PUBLISHED BY

ISRAEL P. WARREN,

52 WASHINGTON STREET,

BOSTON.

PZ 3
C399 F

11.13.2 Mar 16 '06

Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1872,
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"FATHER MERRILL"

is deserving of that distinction, and we accordingly award to it said premium.

We regard this story as eminently natural and well told. Its characters are distinctly portrayed, so that they stand out in the memory like real individuals to whom we have been introduced, and with whom we have had acquaintance. The character of Father Merrill himself is delightfully drawn, and discloses a very lovely and practical form of every-day religion, exhibiting itself in the ordinary intercourse and business of life without cant or even demonstration, — the very beauty of holiness.

It is an uncommonly sensible and admirable book, interesting enough to win the younger readers, and profound enough to instruct and bless the oldest.

I. N. TARBOX,
B. K. PEIRCE,
S. G. ASHTON,
Committee.



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FATHER MERRILL.

CHAPTER I.

HONESTY.

CODLINESS is profitable unto all things; having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."

An old man repeated this grand truth, which so needs to be impressed upon the eager aspirants for worldly gains and worldly honors. Threescore and five years had Father Merrill numbered; yet was not his eye dimmed, or his natural force abated. His figure, tall and erect, his head wearing its crown of glory,

and his face, eloquent with peaceful, loving thoughts,— he was one to win the confidence of all who looked upon him. His counsel was sought by young and old. His sympathy was craved by those who sorrowed and those who rejoiced. Children felt themselves blessed by the touch of his hand, and the suffering were soothed by the tones of his voice.

His wife, a woman of rare goodness, was well worthy to share his home and fortune. "Worthy of a better fortune," as he had sometimes told her, when his own was limited to what he could earn by daily labor.

But for more than a quarter of a century he had been the owner of the best farm and the best house in town. Sons and daughters had here gathered around him, and from this home had gone forth to the active duties of life. But of all, not one remained to cheer the declining years of their parents. In the flush of manhood and womanhood they had died, leaving none to bear their name.

A grandson, Seth Merrill Grant, the only child of Father Merrill's eldest daughter, was

the one link which bound the old man to the coming generations. And this child the grandparents had not seen since he was an infant. Soon after the death of his wife, the father had removed to a distant part of the country, and all intercourse between the families ceased.

Truly these Christian parents had been afflicted; yet through all they had been able to say, "Thy will, O Lord, be done." It was an unexpected providence, however, which took from them their home, when they most needed its comforts, and would most keenly feel their want. To assist a friend, Mr. Merrill had given his name as security in certain business transactions, and, as a result, had been obliged to sacrifice his entire property; although there were those who insisted that he was under no obligation to do this. He was urged to make some arrangement by which this could be avoided.

"Would it be honest?" asked the old man, looking earnestly at the neighbor who counseled him to save his home.

"More honest than Goddard has been," was the reply. "You ought to think of your wife in this matter."

"I have thought of my wife, neighbor Hurd. I've always thought of her first, since a good while before we begun to live together. She never's had reason to doubt my word, and 'twould go hard with us both if she had to begin now."

"But, Father Merrill, this an't your debt, and folks don't think you ought to pay it. Goddard may pull through, but tan't no ways likely; and if he goes under, you'll go with him, unless—"

"Unless I act like a scoundrel," interrupted the old man, with unwonted severity.

"Does your wife know anything about it?" asked the neighbor.

"She knows all about it," was the reply. "I didn't lend my name to Ben Goddard without consulting her. If a woman's got to share a man's lot, she ought to have some voice in managing it. Mother and I don't have no separate interests."

"Have you any objections to my talking with your wife about it?"

This man had been requested to leave no means untried to effect his purpose.

"Not the least in the world," Father Merrill replied to this question. "Come right in now, and I'll promise not to speak a word, unless I'm asked."

Mrs. Merrill listened to her neighbor while he explained the manner in which business could be arranged, and their home be saved. "You see it's what a good many do," he hastened to add, "church members, too; and there an't a soul in this town that would think any less of you or your husband for it."

"There's two that would," the good woman responded. "Father and I should. I don't doubt but what you mean well; but we must keep a clear conscience, whether we have a home or not."

"But Goddard han't been honest, mother Merrill. Your husband didn't expect he'd run half the risks he has, and that makes a difference."

"It makes a difference with him, but not with us," was Mrs. Merrill's answer. "I can't think but what he meant to do about right. We mustn't judge him too hard. We all make mistakes."

"And that's the way you look at it!" remarked Mr. Hurd, a little impatiently.

"Yes, neighbor, it is. Father and I've thought it all over, and made up our minds."

"'Twas hard for you, mother; but he wanted to talk with you," said Mr. Merrill to his wife, when their visitor had left. "'Twas all out of good will to us that he come. It's likely to me Ben Goddard won't keep on many days longer, though I don't doubt he's trying, might and main. I wanted to help him along; but I didn't expect how 'twould turn out."

"You did what you thought was for the best, father. We're both of us strong and well, and if we have to go away from here, there'll be a place for us somewhere else."

"There'll be a home for me as long as you live, Mary," replied the old man, laying his

hand caressingly upon his wife's head. "But I hope Ben will come over, and explain matters, so that I shan't blame him more than he deserves."

Just at night a worn, tired-looking man drove up to the door, and fastened his horse, without once looking to the house. He lingered a little, fumbling awkwardly with some part of the harness. Then he raised his hand to his face, half shading his eyes; and thus he might have stood, unconscious of the lapse of time, had not a pleasant voice called to him.

"I can't come in," he replied. "But I've something to tell you, if you'll hear it."

"Of course I'll hear it. Come right in and sit down. Mother and me are here alone."

Ben Goddard did not again refuse, although it seemed impossible for him to enter that house.

"I've come to tell you that —" Here the visitor paused in his pre-arranged speech, and exclaimed, "I'd rather have lost my right hand, Father Merrill, than come here to-night."

I'm a scoundrel and a thief; but I didn't mean it. You won't believe I ever meant to wrong you, the best friend I ever had. Say you won't believe that, whatever comes." At this point, the speaker broke down utterly, and before another word was spoken, knelt at the feet of the man whom he had beggared.

"Ben, my boy, you mustn't kneel to me. I'm going to believe every word you say; and I'm glad you come. Take a chair here, right between mother and me, and tell us all about it," said Mr. Merrill.

But Ben Goddard was like a child in his grief. Now that his self-control had given way, great sobs convulsed his frame, while tears rained down his cheeks. Despite all remonstrances, he would not rise until he had received assurance of forgiveness; and even then it cost him a terrible effort to meet the gaze of his friends. These dear friends, who had known and loved him since he was a boy, wept with him, moved by sympathy rather than sorrow, for their own misfortunes.

"I haven't shut my eyes for two nights," he

remarked, when he could command his voice. "Last night, at ten o'clock, I went down to the mill, determined never to leave it alive. It seemed to me I couldn't live and meet what's coming."

"And did you think you could meet your God better than you could your fellow-men?" asked Father Merrill, his voice quivering with emotion. "Oh Ben! I wouldn't believed that of you," he added. "Why, my boy, your mother was a Christian woman, and your father was a Christian man. You wouldn't taken your own life?"

"I *couldn't* do it," was the reply. "But I was sorely tempted. 'Twas thinking of you and mother Merrill made me feel the worst. I'd been willing to die, if that would freed you from all connection with my business."

"Don't, Ben, don't talk so," said Mrs. Merrill. "I don't count our property anything beside your life. Didn't you think of your wife and children?"

"Not so much as I did of you and your husband," was the answer to this question. I

didn't give up till yesterday; and now I've managed to put things off, so there's one chance for you to save yourselves."

"Ben! Ben! You han't come to tell me I can do a dishonest thing," exclaimed his host. "I didn't expect you'd run such risks when I give you my name, and I'm sorry you did; but I shan't go back on the security. I can bear poverty; but I can't dishonor my Master."

"I didn't do right," responded Mr. Goddard, sadly. "I ought to have consulted you about the risks; but I was so sure of making money, and clearing off every debt, that I neglected it. If it hadn't been for the freshet I believe I should. That did a good deal of damage; and while I was repairing, I lost a good many orders that would have given me great profits. I've tried hard to save myself and you, father Merrill; but everything has seemed to work against me since the freshet."

"The Lord's hand was in it, my boy," was the old man's reply. "If this leads you to acknowledge him as your God, you'll be a more prosperous man than if you'd made all

the money you expected. I want to see you a Christian, more than I want to keep my home."

"I mean to be a Christian some time," Mr. Goddard made answer. "I know I need religion. I never felt that as I did last night; and I never felt my own wickedness as I did then."

"We must all feel our wickedness before we are willing to ask God's forgiveness. I hope you thought of that, Ben."

"I'm afraid I thought more of your forgiveness than I did of God's. I could bear my own trouble, and my family could bear their part of it."

"And God will help us to bear our trouble," said Mr. Merrill. "I'm so thankful that you meant to do right, it don't seem so hard. We'd better talk it all over, and have a fair understanding. It's always best to look everything square in the face, and see the worst of it."

"Had you been to supper before you came from home?" now inquired Mrs. Merrill,

who had not thought before to ask the question.

"I left home soon after dinner," was the reply. "But it's all the same. I don't wish for any supper. I haven't eaten much for the last week or two."

"Then there's the more need you should eat with us," said the good woman. "Father, you and Ben better go into the west room to talk over your business."

From the windows of this west room could be seen the long sweep of meadow land, and the rich upland fields, which formed a large part of Seth Merrill's goodly estate. Years of skillful cultivation had made this a model farm; and in all the country round there was not another which would so attract the attention of a stranger. The owner of this fair heritage did not look from the windows, as was his wont; but seating himself at an old-fashioned desk, motioned his companion to a chair near him, as he said, "I want to know everything about your business that concerns me. I must make some calculations."

Again the younger man wept; but directly his host exclaimed, "Come, Ben, this won't do. The sooner the better, my boy; and I trust I'm prepared for the worst."

By a great effort, Ben Goddard restrained his tears. He had come prepared to make every possible explanation in regard to his business; and taking from his pocket a large package of papers, he soon proved that he had been neither careless nor dishonest.

Mr. Merrill, quick to see and acknowledge this, said heartily, "I know you meant well, Ben, and you had reason to calculate on coming out right. I'm glad to know it, too; and I have just as much confidence in you now as I ever had."

"Oh, Father Merrill, do you really mean that?" cried the unfortunate man.

"Yes, Ben, I *do* mean it. I'm in the habit of saying what I mean; and there's another thing, — I'd rather lose every dollar I'm worth, than know you've been dishonest. 'Twill take all; but there'll be a way provided for mother and me."

"But it is so hard," said Mr. Goddard. "It almost distracts me to think of it."

"No, Ben; don't feel like that. There's a providence in it for all of us. You've time enough to make money, if you live; and I hope I haven't set my heart on this place. If I have, it's best it should be taken from me."

At this moment, Mrs. Merrill opened the door, to say that supper was ready, her sweet, placid face showing no traces of agitation. "Come, Ben," she said, pleasantly. "It's a good while since you ate with us, and you ought to have a good appetite after your ride."

Thus urged, he went to the table, where his plate was heaped with tempting food, which he could not but accept. "I haven't eaten such a meal for a fortnight," he said, with something like cheerfulness, as he declined the fourth cup of tea. "I begin to feel some courage; and, please God, you shall spend your last days in this house, if we all live ten years. I'm going home to tell my family what you've done for me. They shall know that you've saved me,

soul and body. If you'd reproached me, and believed I meant to be dishonest, I shouldn't know how to go home. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll hurry along."

"'Twas just as I expected," remarked Mr. Merrill that evening, when, with his wife, he reviewed the events of the day. "Ben meant well; and if he'd asked me, I don't know but I should have told him to keep on. He was always a good boy, and it may be that this is the way to make him think more of another world than he does of this. Now, mother, you and I must hold him up. There's a good many'll say he's been dishonest, and that'll hurt him about getting into business. It's the Lord's doings, all of it; and we won't complain."

"No, father," was the wife's reply. "There'll be a way opened for us. I'm just as sure of it, as I be that we've been blessed, in basket and store, all these years. I love the old place; but now the children are all gone, we don't need so much room. There's only you and me."

"That's all, Mary; and God knows what's best for us."

As Mr. Goddard had said, he began to feel some courage. The fact that father Merrill had accepted his explanation, and still trusted him, was of great importance. His principal creditor, although not a generous man, was scrupulously just, so that he could count upon honorable treatment.



CHAPTER II.

FAMILY CONSULTATION AT MR. GODDARD'S.

THE mill, of which he had been the owner, was a woolen manufactory, producing a kind of flannel, then coming into favor, and could be run at great profit. He hoped to make some arrangements, by which he would be allowed to retain charge of the mill, and share the profits. Everything depended upon the principal creditor, and during his ride home Mr Goddard was devising ways and means by which this man might be influenced. At length it occurred to him that father Merrill's judgment and counsel would have more weight than that of any other friend. "But I couldn't ask another favor of one I've ruined," he said aloud. "That would be too much. I must take my chance."

At home, wife and children waited anxiously for his return. There was Ben, junior, sixteen years of age, the best scholar and the handsomest boy in the district. A strong, well-knit frame, and a full, broad forehead, gave proof of the energy which only waited the development of time and opportunity. He was mother's boy; as devoted to her as if she had been some young girl whose love he sought to win. "Handy," the neighbors called him, because he knew so well how to assist his mother, and lighten her labors; but I fancy that "hearty" would have best described him. A universal favorite, many were the predictions of his success in life. He, himself, also indulged in ambitious dreams. To go through college and study a profession, were the first steps in his anticipated career; and not one wish or hope was concealed from his mother. His father, too, shared his confidence; but this father knew that he held the second place in his boy's affections.

Next in age to Ben was Dell, a girl of twelve, and a fitting companion for her brother: ambi-

tious to excel in whatever claimed his attention, and desiring no higher praise than to be assured she had done as well as he. William, two years younger, and the twins, Charles and Charlotte, five years of age, completed the family number.

Mr. Goddard had been unwilling that his wife or son should know the extent of his liabilities, or the danger of his failure. He had been morose and gloomy, quite unlike his usual self; yet he gave no explanation, beyond saying that his business troubled him. But there were others who, knowing of his embarrassment, did not scruple to carry the evil tidings to his family.

"I wish father would tell me about it himself," said Ben to his mother. "I know I could help him if he would. Things have been going wrong ever since the freshet. I've seen enough to know that, and father don't seem like the same man he did before."

"No, he don't," answered Mrs. Goddard with a sigh. "I know there's trouble coming; but he won't tell me."

The conduct of the husband and father was closely scrutinized. After a time a terrible fear took possession of his wife's heart. In his sleep he revealed what he would not disclose in his waking hours, at the same time hinting vaguely at a sure way of escape.

When he went to the mill, the night before his visit to Mr. Merrill, he was followed by his son, who did not allow him to remain unobserved for a single moment. All unconscious of this, the wretched man paced the floor of his counting-room, while a knotted coil of rope lay upon the desk. Several times he paused in his nervous walk and examined the rope, until, at last, he threw it from him with an expression of horror. "My God! save me from myself," he cried.

Outside, the boy watched and waited, great drops of perspiration on his forehead, while he scarcely dared breathe, lest he should betray his presence. Long past midnight his father returned to the house, he following cautiously. He lay down beside his brother, closing his eyes, and hoping to shut out the picture which

haunted him. In that night he seemed to grow older by many years. His brain was strangely active, and for the time all personal ambition was forgotten. To encourage his father, assist his mother, and in some way help his brothers and sisters, he was ready to make any sacrifice.

Little did the father know of the true character of his son; little did he dream how he had been guarded by the care of this boy, who, the next morning, greeted him so cheerfully. But now, as he pursued his solitary drive, he thanked God that he was yet alive, with health and strength to labor, and if so it might be, to retrieve his fortune.

When he reached home he received an affectionate welcome from each member of his family, the younger children clamoring for caresses. Surely he was not a poor man.

"We waited supper for you," said his wife.

"And I have eaten supper with father and mother Merrill," was the reply. "You should not have waited so late for me. But perhaps I can eat again."

"Wait for Ben," urged Dell, who wished to share all things with him; and so soon as he had cared for old Bill he came in response to his sister's call.

It had been weeks since so cheerful a group had gathered around this table. A burden seemed lifted from all hearts, and yet not a word had been spoken in regard to the subject which was to them of vital importance. After supper Mr. Goddard talked with his children until the striking of the clock reminded them that it was time for them to retire.

Ben and Dell, who counted themselves "grown up," were allowed to consult their own pleasure in the matter of sleep, and this evening their father desired their companionship. He had something to tell them; and as parents and children grouped themselves closely together, he felt strong to do and bear whatever might be demanded of him.

Beginning with the first business venture, in which he had been assisted by Mr. Merrill, he recounted in detail his plans and his expectations. He had been confident of success.

He spoke of the anxiety he had suffered, and the agony he had endured, confessing the temptation which had assailed him.

"It makes the blood curdle in my veins to think of it," he exclaimed. "I was a fool and a coward to think of leaving you to bear what I could not bear myself. But something held me back, and, thank God, that temptation can never come to me again. I didn't think so much of you as I did of the old folks that must lose their home through my misfortune. 'Twas terrible for me to go over there to-day. I'd rather have lost my right hand; but they treated me as though I was their son, and encouraged me to hope for better days. Ben, my boy, do you think we can get a living when the old mill is gone?"

Ben's labored breathing betrayed his emotion, and it was almost with a gasp that he said, "We must pay Mr. Merrill, whether we have a living or not. I can work."

"So can I," rejoined Dell, speaking for the first time. "Ben and I can work together somewhere. It's too bad those dear old people

should lose their beautiful home. Couldn't you help it, father?"

"No, child, I couldn't, since I thought there was any danger," replied Mr. Goddard, with a quivering voice. "I've tried my best; but it's no use. Wife, haven't you something to say?" he asked, turning to the woman at his side.

"No; only we must do the best we can," she answered. "I'm sorry for father and mother Merrill. That seems the worst. I wish—" Here she paused, not caring to complete the sentence.

"I wish too, wife," said her husband sadly. "But wishes never avail anything. If I live ten years, I can make this matter right. I could do it in less time if Mr. Cofran would allow me to run the mill at any decent rate."

"Wouldn't he?" asked Ben, now fully roused.

"I don't know," was the reply. "It all depends on whether he thinks me honest, and cares to give me a chance. Father Merrill would have more influence with him than any one else; but I can't ask another favor of the

old man. I meant to stave off the crash as long as I could; but now, since it's all understood, I don't care how soon it comes. Then we shall know the worst, and can make our plans accordingly. I'm afraid you'll have to put off going to school, Ben. I meant to send you right along."

"I'll send myself some time; but I can wait," the boy replied bravely. "I'll help you the best I know how, if you'll let me do it my own way. I've got a plan, or the shadow of one. It won't cost anything to try it, and it won't hurt anybody; but I'm not ready to tell what it is."

Later, when all in the house were still, Ben went softly into his sister's room, where the two held a whispered consultation, while the old clock on the stairs ticked loudly, as if to remind them of the flight of time. "Why, it's two o'clock!" at length exclaimed Ben. "Go to sleep now, and we'll see what will happen when we're all wide awake down stairs."

Mr. Goddard left his bed early next morning; but he had not been long up when his

son accosted him cheerfully, saying, "Well, father, I hope you are going to let me try my plan. The more I think of it the better it seems."

"Does your mother know about it?"

"No, sir. No one knows except Dell. But I think you can trust me."

"I think I *can*, my boy," was the hearty response.

"Then I can have old Bill to-day, and go where I please?"

"Yes," answered the father; and that he trusted his son was proved by the fact that he asked no questions. "I must be at home all day. I have money to pay off the help, and shall find enough to do without riding. The world looks brighter to me this morning than it has for a long time. If I could only have that old mill two years, as trade is now, I could do something."

"If you could, father, I would take Billy Brown's place, and not ask for any help either. I know about chemicals as well as he does."

"Perhaps; but I'm afraid it's no use to think

of the mill. We must give that up, and try the next best thing."

At this Ben turned away to light the kitchen fire, and make ready for his mother. Dell soon appeared, her face eloquent with the secret which had been intrusted to her, and which seemed to her the grandest thing in the world.

"Can we have old Bill?" she asked in a low tone.

"Yes; that's settled," replied her brother. "So all we've got to do is to be ready for a start. I'm going to work in the garden. You help mother, and mind you look bright. Don't let her see any long faces."

"I won't," answered Dell, and directly she was trilling a merry lay, which rang out upon the morning air clear and sweet as the song of a bird.

Mrs. Goddard, cheered by this, gave ample praise to her daughter for what had been accomplished in the way of preparation for breakfast. "There's not much left for me to do," she said, smiling.

"We didn't mean there should be," replied the energetic girl. "Ben and I want to go away this morning, if you can spare me."

"Yes, child, I can spare you, and I shall be glad to have you go. You and Ben have earned a holiday."

"You dear, good mother!" cried Dell, kissing her, and then giving attention to the twins, who came forward, rubbing their eyes, not quite certain that they were awake.

Charley called loudly for Ben; but in default of the young man's appearance, managed to accept the services of Ben's sister. It really began to seem like old times in that home. A stranger might have fancied that some good fortune had come to the family. No one was allowed to wear or see a long face. Mr. Goddard went out from breakfast hopeful and courageous.



CHAPTER III.

NEW PLANS.

NOT long after this Bill was harnessed to the light wagon, and old Towser, having mutely begged the privilege of making one of the party, Ben and Dell started for their drive. Usually they had eyes for every flower which nodded in the breeze, and ears for every sound of Nature's music; but this morning they were intent upon business.

"If we could only do something so that Mr. Merrill needn't lose his home," said Dell, who, after her brother's lucid explanation of the law as regards security, comprehended that her father's friend was to be held responsible for debts her father had incurred. "I don't think anybody ought to take his house just

because —" Here her logic failed, and she waited for Ben to speak.

"There are two sides to that," he remarked. "But it's bad business from first to last, and the more I think of it the more I'm afraid I shall be ashamed to look Mr. Merrill in the face."

"Why, you haven't done anything, Ben. They know you haven't, and you can tell them how sorry you are, so they won't blame you."

They were nearing their destination as the young girl thus encouraged her brother, and old Bill, to whom the place was familiar, soon stopped where he had stopped the previous day, and looking around in a leisurely way, seemed to say, "Here we are, in good, honest company, true as steel, and ready to work for a living."

At a word from his master, Towser stretched himself under the wagon as Dell sprang to the vine-covered porch, where she waited for her brother to announce their coming.

Before this was done, however, Mrs. Merrill

opened the door, and said kindly, "So I am to have visitors this morning. I suppose I ought to know you."

"My name is Dell Goddard," was the reply.

"So it is, child, and that's your brother. Good morning, Ben. I'm glad to see you. I should known who you was if I'd seen your horse. Come right in to the west room. Why, Ben, how you grow! You're most as tall as your father, and they say you're a good boy. You look like it, too. You make me think of my John. You've come to make me a visit, han't you?"

"We've come over on business," the boy replied, after acknowledging the compliments he had received. "Is your husband at home?"

"He's about home. I guess likely he's back of the barn. Can you find him, or shall I send Betsy?"

"I can find him, Mrs. Merrill. I wish to see him on business, and I will leave my sister with you."

"It's just as pretty here as it can be," said Dell, when her shyness had worn off a little.

"I should like to live in such a place, and I'm so sorry you've got to go away, all because of father. We're all of us dreadful sorry. But, mother Merrill, Ben and I are going to earn it all back for you," she added familiarly, in her eagerness, adopting the style of address used by her parents. "Ben can do most anything, and I can do as he tells me. Don't you think we can earn it back if we work real hard?"

Then two little brown hands stole into the clasp of hands thin and withered, while a child's face was pressed close to one wrinkled and care-worn.

"Dear! dear!" murmured the good woman, unable to say more, as her tears began to flow.

"Don't cry, don't cry! We certainly will work," pleaded Dell with a sob. "Father told us all about it last night, and he says there an't anybody good as you be, and—" Here the speaker was forced to pause for want of breath, and the next moment she was sitting in mother Merrill's lap, with two loving arms about her. "Why, we're both crying!" she

said. "'Tan't a bit as I meant to do; but you see I forgot what Ben told me to say."

"I guess you've said just the right thing," replied Mrs. Merrill. "Any way, you've done me good, and we're going to be friends. I han't any grandchildren to come and see me, so I guess I'll adopt you and Ben. How would you like to have me for your grandmother?"

"I should like it ever so much, and I know Ben would. And you'd like Ben, too. He's real good, and he makes me good. Mother says he's her right hand, and the children love him most as well as they do her."

"Yes, yes. I don't doubt it. I shall be proud of my grandchildren; and you can tell Ben about it when he comes in, and see what he says. Now wipe your eyes, and we'll see what we can find for luncheon."

Meanwhile Ben, junior, had made his best bow to Mr. Merrill, and been cordially welcomed. "If you're not too busy, I'd like to talk with you about my father's business," he said with great effort. "I want to do some-

thing about it. He told us about your kindness last night, and I wanted to come and see you."

"That's right," was the hearty response. "I'm glad to see you. We'll sit right down here, on this flat stone, and say just what we want to."

Ben found it more difficult to commence the conversation than he had supposed, and the silence was getting awkward, when his friend said, questioningly, "Well?"

"Yes, Mr. Merrill," he made answer. "I thought I knew what to say; but I don't. I've known father was in trouble, and I felt bad about it; but I couldn't help him till he gave me a chance. Mother and I watched him, though he didn't know it, and night before last I followed him to the mill. Perhaps you don't know —"

"Yes, my boy; he told me how he was tempted. I wouldn't thought it of him; but it's only them that trust in the Lord that are safe."

"Yes, sir," answered the listener, vaguely.

"It frightened me to see him; but last night, when he told us all about it, I thought I could do most anything. You see I'm able to work, and I'm willing. If Mr. Cofran would lease us the mill for five years, we could make all square."

"Do you think that?" asked Mr. Merrill.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Shall I take too much of your time if I tell you how it looks to me?"

"No, my boy; tell me. I want to hear."

Ben proceeded to explain, showing a more thorough knowledge of business than would have been thought possible. The old man considered. "I don't care so much for ourselves," his companion added. "But your place must be redeemed. It shall be, if I have to work sixteen hours out of twenty-four, and live on bread and water. I'm good for hard work and poor fare."

Mr. Merrill looked admiringly at the brave boy, saying, "Hard work won't hurt you, but poor fare might. I'm sorry for your father, and I can't say but it's hard for mother and

me to give up our home; but I believe your father meant to be honest. You think you could do the work of a man and a boy?"

"I could do what Billy Brown and his boy do. I know I could, and do it as well. He makes mistakes sometimes, so that father loses a good deal; but I should be more careful."

"How much rent could you afford to pay for the mill?"

"I don't know, sir. Father said it was of no use to think about it; but he said, too, that you could influence Mr. Cofran more than anybody else. Father wouldn't ask you to talk with him, after what's happened; but I thought perhaps you would, when you knew."

The speaker was conscious of having expressed himself awkwardly; yet his companion did not seem to observe this. It was *what* had been said which moved the old man to ask,—

"How would you like to go over to Mr. Cofran's with me to-day?"

"I should like it very much," responded the boy, springing to his feet. "Old Bill is all

ready, and if you *would* go over there and talk with him, I should be grateful as long as I live."

"Let that go, Ben. I'm always glad to lend a helping hand, and I'll do the best I can for you with Mr. Cofran. We'll go in and see mother, and get some luncheon, and then start. What! another visitor?" he said directly after, when he met Dell in the large, pleasant kitchen. "I should know you for Ben's sister. How do you do this morning, my little maid?"

"Very well, I thank you," answered the child, smiling at his quaint address.

"I've adopted her, father," said Mrs. Merrill.

"Yes; and, Ben, shouldn't you like to have her for a grandmother?" asked Dell, quickly.

"Indeed, I should," was the reply.

"Well, then, you can. She told me so, and I've had a real nice time."

This was not said presumingly, although in some children Dell's frankness would have seemed like presumption. Certainly Father Merrill did not so consider it, as he stooped

to see the color of her eyes, and note the dimple in her chin. It did not take long to make explanations, eat a substantial lunch, and start on their errand, while Dell waited with her new grandmother.

"It's Ben Goddard's girl," replied Betsy to the hired man, who had asked what child that was out in the yard. "She and her brother come over this morning. He's gone off with Father Merrill.

"About that confounded business, likely," was the response. "It's enough to make a saint swear to think of the old folks being turned out of house and home for that rascally Goddard. If I could have my way, the creditors might whistle for all they'd get here. I've always thought the old man was pretty shrewd; but this dumbfounds me. He's been told what to do. There's plenty to prove that Goddard's been a dishonest rascal."


"They don't believe it," said Betsy. "He was over here last night, and made it all right with them. I'm sorry about it as you be; but I'm glad Father Merrill won't do what he

thinks is wrong. He and his wife are about the only straight-out Christians I know of, and it makes me better to see them do just right."

"That's a woman's way of talking; but I tell you what, men know they've got to look out for the main chance in the world. I don't think no better of the old man for letting his farm go under the hammer to pay Ben Goddard's debts."

Looking out for the main chance! And what, pray, is the main chance, but that which shall endure longest, and rank highest, in that great day when all secrets shall be revealed? Mr. Merrill had regard to this, believing that godliness is profitable unto all things. "Do right, and leave the result with God," was his motto.

Not that he did not bring to his business untiring diligence and careful consideration. He was counted a shrewd man, and a good judge of property; seldom deceived in his estimates, and rarely at fault in his calculations. The plan proposed by Ben Goddard commended itself to his judgment, and he



was glad to do what he could for its furtherance.

Mr. Cofran loved money: but, as I have before said, he was a just man, and after some preliminary statements, calculated to put him in good humor, he listened patiently to the plea in behalf of his debtor. Some rumors had reached him to the discredit of Mr. Goddard; but when Father Merrill, who was in reality to be the only sufferer, expressed a belief that the unfortunate man had acted in good faith, he was fain to believe the same.

"You see there is no possibility of loss to you by the arrangement I propose," said the visitor.

"I see," was the reply. "I hoped Goddard would pull through. I don't want the mill on my hands. I don't know much about such property; and I never should have had anything to do with Goddard if you hadn't gone security for him. It's been a bad thing for you."

"'Twill take all I'm worth to meet his liabilities."

"The rascal! He don't deserve any favors from anybody. I don't see how you can say anything good of him. But, to please you, I don't know but I'll let him keep on where he is, if he'll pay me twelve per cent. on the full valuation of the property, and keep it in repair. You say his boy's waiting for you in the village?"

"Yes; and a noble boy he is; worth more than a dozen old mills to any man. He'll be anxious to know the result of my visit, so I think I'll hurry along."

"No, Mr. Merrill, I'll send for the boy. I want to have a little talk with him, and see what he's made of. Another thing. Do you mean to sell your place?"

"I shall be obliged to;" and surely the old man may be pardoned if something like a sigh supplemented this answer.

"Then I think I have a friend who would be glad to buy it, and pay a fair price for it. His wife is in poor health, and his physician has recommended country life. He is on the look out for the right kind of a place, and I

think yours will just suit him. He won't care to take possession before another spring, so there's plenty of time to make arrangements."

In obedience to the summons he received, Ben Goddard presented himself, and after hearing the decision of Mr. Cofran, thanked him, with all the gratitude which broken words and tears could express.

"I've done it more for Mr. Merrill's sake than your father's," was the reply, softened somewhat by the tone in which it was uttered.

"And I thank you more for his sake than father's," said the noble boy. "If I live, Mr. Merrill shan't lose anything for his goodness. So I thank you both, and I'll prove what I say."

"Well said, my boy," responded Mr. Cofran. "I think better of your father for having such a son; and so long as you pay the interest promptly, you can run the old mill day and night for all me. To-morrow I'll come over and see your father. The sooner this is settled the better."

I will not repeat the thanks Father Merrill

received on his way home. He had bound to him one strong, brave heart, which would never fail him.

"I can't express half I want to," at length said Ben. "Words don't amount to much. I wish there was something I could do for you to prove how grateful I am."

"You think I've done a good deal for you, don't you, Ben?" was the response made by his friend.

"Yes, sir; of course I know you have," exclaimed the boy.

"And you an't ashamed to own it?"

"Why, no, sir; I'm proud to own it. How could I be ashamed?"

"I'll do all I can for you, Ben; but you may die to-night. If God should so will it, all I could do wouldn't amount to anything. I've tried to help put you in a way to earn money; but I can't give you health or strength. You know who gives you these, Ben."

"I suppose I do, sir; though I never thought much about it."

"You'll think of me to-night?"

"Why, yes, sir; I couldn't help it if I should try."

"Well, my boy, I like to have you think of me," said the old man, with a smile. But there's one thing I want you to *do* for me. I want you to read a chapter in the Bible, and thank God for giving you health and strength. Will you do it, or is that too much to ask?"

"I'll read the chapter, sir, and I'll try to thank God."

"Try to thank him, my boy! How can you help it? You've thanked me."

"Yes, sir; but that's different. I can't see God."

"But he sees you, and hears your faintest whisper. Don't you suppose God had something to do with your business to-day?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I know, my boy. I prayed that he would incline Mr. Cofran's heart to hear my request, and my prayer was answered. I shall thank God on my knees to-night for this great mercy."

There was a struggle in the boy's mind.

He had not been religiously educated. His father had been engrossed in business, and his mother had drifted with the current rather than opposed its force. The family attended church when convenient to do so, Ben and Dell being more constant than the other members. When a child, his mother taught him a simple form of prayer; but long ago he had ceased to repeat this, so that now he never prayed.

"Mr. Merrill, I'll do as you want me to," he said, after a long silence. "I *will* thank God to-night, and I will thank him every night."

"And in the morning, too, Ben, you'll need to ask him to keep you from doing wrong through the day. Why, my boy, your very breath depends upon God's will. You want to live to help your father, and some time you'll want to do something for yourself. So you see life is worth something, whether you thank God for it or not. You'll need him for a friend all the way through; and if your peace is made with him, it won't make much difference what happens. This life is nothing, compared with

eternity. "Twon't be long now before mother and me will go to our eternal home."

They did not talk much after this until they reached Father Merrill's house.

"We've been greatly prospered," then said the old man to his wife. "Ben or his father, I an't certain which, is going to run the mill, and everything is to be settled to-morrow. The Lord went with us. Now after supper these children can go home and tell the good news."

Once more, before leaving, Ben expressed his gratitude to the dear old man who had so befriended him. "You'll see what I shall do," he said. "And we shall owe everything to you."

"Everything to God, my boy," was the reply. "Let your heart be right in his sight, and thank him for his goodness."

How happy were they all as they separated, with promises to meet again. Even old Towser seemed to understand that there was cause for rejoicing, while Dell was ready to shout for very gladness. "Won't father be glad!" she

exclaimed. "And now I'm going to work, too. I can do what Lotty Brown does, and that will save some money. Oh, I'm so happy! But it seems to me you're dreadful sober, Ben. I thought you'd laugh all the time. An't you glad?"

"I guess I am," was the response. "But I want to think it all over. I shall tell mother all about it now. I didn't want to tell her till I was sure."

Ben was thinking; yet, just then, not so much of business as of his relations to God. He remembered his promise to Mr. Merrill, and for almost the first time in his life realized his dependence upon a higher power. This, however, he did not care to reveal to his sister, who made an effort to be quiet, that she might not disturb him.

In sight of home his face brightened, and the welcome he received banished all religious thoughts. It was not until he was in his chamber that he recalled the subject. Then he took a handsome Bible from the drawer in which it had been placed months before; and,

too ignorant of the Scriptures to make an intelligent selection, opened the book and gave attention to what first presented. He read the twelfth chapter of Luke, omitting not a single word. Thus much he did willingly; but this was not all which had been required of him. He assumed the attitude of prayer, thinking of his benefactor, and wondering in what words the good man had expressed his gratitude to God. He attempted some acknowledgment of mercies given, and in a feeble manner offered his thanks.

Sleep was sweet to him that night,—sweeter for the consciousness of a day well spent; and the next morning he went about his usual work with unwonted energy.



CHAPTER IV.

CHANGES AT THE MILL.

IT was still early when Mr. Cofran drove to the mill and accosted his debtor. "I suppose your boy told you about his visit to me yesterday, and that I told him I'd make a bargain with you for the use of the mill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I don't exactly like the way you've done things; but I don't know as I've any reason to complain. I'm sorry for Mr. Merrill. It comes hard on him." As if the listener did not feel this! "I shouldn't stand in the gap, as he's going to, if I was in his place. I'd save myself, and let the rest go. But it's his way, and it's none of my business. Your boy seems to have the right idea about things. Where is he this morning?"

"Not far away," answered Mr. Goddard. "I didn't know where he was going yesterday; but I should have asked you for a lease of the mill. I know it looks as though I'd been dishonest; but God knows I didn't mean it."

"'Tan't for me to dispute you, Mr. Goddard. You've got one strong friend in the old man you've ruined, and you shall have a chance to prove your honesty if you want it."

After this, Mr. Cofran set himself to assist the man, who gladly made a plain statement of his affairs. "Things look better for you than I expected," was the comment. "I'll keep to my part of the bargain as long as you keep to yours. You needn't thank me," he continued; "I don't mean to run any risks."

Notwithstanding this Mr. Goddard did thank him, very heartily; and no sooner was he gone, than the manufacturer proceeded to inaugurate a new order of things. Billy Brown, who had been considered the most important man on the premises, was informed that he could look for another situation; and as another had been offered, the previous day, this matter was speedily settled.

"I'm thinking the lad knows what to do," was the reply. "He's always mixing round, giving a hint, and trying the color. I'll give him a little teaching, and welcome. I'm fond of him, for his kind ways, let alone my good will to you. 'Twill be a change for him, though, and he so taking to his books!"

It was a change, indeed; but Ben was thoroughly in earnest, and when business was settled, he had not a doubt of the ultimate success of his plan. His father, inspired by his example, worked industriously, so that he was able to diminish the number of his workmen, and thus make a large reduction in his expenses. The whole family were organized into an efficient working force, while there was a general enthusiasm throughout the mill.

On one of the beautiful autumn days, which seem, from their late coming, to be fairest of all the year, Mr. and Mrs. Merrill drove over to see their friends. The visit had been long anticipated; yet there could not fail to be something of sadness mingled with its pleasure.

At this time Mr. Goddard's debts had been paid ; no one suffering by him, except the man who, of all others, least deserved it. Mr. Cofran's friend had purchased the estate of Father Merrill, paying a liberal price, and evincing a rare consideration for the feeling of the old people.

Many had protested against the sale, offering to advance money, and take a mortgage of the property. Mr. Goddard was sure he could pay the interest yearly, and make some reduction of the principal. Both father and son urged that they might be allowed to do this ; but Mr. Merrill would not consent.

"I'd rather Mr. Murray 'd live here than anybody else, and mother feels the same," said the old man. "We an't going to be very poor, after all. We've got a horse, and four cows, and fifty sheep ; and the crops are going to turn out better than they have for ten years. Then there's all the household stuff ; so we shan't suffer no way. I want you to have a fair chance ; you've got children to look out for, while mother and me han't nobody but ourselves."

So it was all settled. The property had changed owners ; while the present occupants were to remain until spring, managing the same as ever. No labor necessary for the future good of the farm was neglected ; indeed, it seemed to those who were interested, that there had never been so much done in any previous autumn.

It was done cheerfully, too. No one heard Father Merrill or his wife complain ; and when they drove into Mr. Goddard's yard, they looked not at all like people upon whom the hand of misfortune had rested heavily. Only Mrs. Goddard and the younger children were in the house to welcome them ; and not long after their arrival Mr. Merrill went to the mill.

"Well, Ben, my boy, hard at work this morning, are you ?"

"Yes, sir, I am," was the reply to this greeting. "I can't shake hands with you, but I'm just as glad to see you as though I could. I've been into matters, pretty deep, as you can see," added the boy, with a laugh. "Have you seen father ?"

"No. I didn't know where to look for him."

"Nobody knows, only he's always on the premises. Why, he does the work of two men. I tell you it don't take so many hands to run this old mill as it used to, and we're going to make a big thing of it. You'll have your house back in a few years, if there don't anything break more than a belt."

Ben was in rather uproarious spirits over his success in the business he had assumed. Not one failure or mistake had made a loss for his father; and now a large order was to be filled, at the earliest possible day. After some further conversation, our hero remarked, "I'd go and hunt up father; but I can't leave my vat for an hour or two."

"I'll find him, my boy. I'm glad you're getting along so well, and I've no doubt you'll be prospered."

Mr. Goddard was not far away, and seeing the visitor, hastened to meet him. The father was less demonstrative than the son, but his satisfaction was equally apparent.

"We never made so much cloth, in the

same length of time, as we have in the last two months, and we never made it with so little expense. Ben's got everybody on the place enlisted to do their best, and there's a strife to see which shall do most."

This was said as they sat in the counting-room; and Mr. Merrill replied, "You've a great deal to be thankful for."

"Yes, I have, and I know who I owe it all to. If it hadn't been for you —"

"If it hadn't been for the Lord, who was on your side, you'd have worked in vain. Don't exalt the creature above the Creator. God has remembered you in your perplexities."

The look of annoyance upon the listener's face was banished almost instantly; yet not before it had been observed by his companion, who pursued the subject no further at that time. Hastening to speak of what was sure to interest, he remarked upon the improved appearance of the mill-yard and out-buildings. "You must have been hard at work," he said.

"Yes, sir, I've tried to keep busy," was the reply. "I don't mean to run behind if hard

work is good for anything. I shouldn't have much to trouble me now, if you could keep your home."

As the two went through the mill, not one employed in it but knew the old man, whose goodness had been so often the theme of conversation. "It's him Ben's working for," remarked one and another; and, had they added, "it's him *we're* working for," they would have spoken the truth.

Dell stopped her work, to say how glad she was to see grandfather Merrill, and presently she was hastening to the house to say the same thing to his wife. After the two hours' attention given to his vat, Ben left it for a time, and at noon a happy company sat down to the best dinner the hostess could prepare. Treated as honored parents throughout the entire visit, Mr. and Mrs. Merrill were pleased with everything they saw and heard, and grudged not the sacrifice they had been called to make.

Before leaving, Ben found an opportunity to assure his friend that he had not once omitted

to thank God for the mercies of each day. "But I'm afraid, sometimes, that the thanks come from my lips more than from my heart," he said, sadly. "I'm thinking of my work, or I'm very tired, so I don't always feel the same; but when I have time to sit down and think, I know I'm indebted to God for everything I have. Sundays Dell and Willie read with me, and we always go to meeting. I told Dell what I promised you, and she said she'd try and thank God, too. I try to do right, but I don't suppose I always make out. If I'm ever as good as you be I shall be satisfied. But, Father Merrill, there's one thing troubles me. I want to do something in the world; and I've heard folks say that Christians an't so likely to succeed as others."

"And did you believe it, my boy?"

"I don't know," was the hesitating reply. "It don't seem as though it ought to be so."

"It an't so," said the old man, earnestly. "A man can get rich sometimes by lying and cheating; but getting rich an't always being successful. Money's a good thing; but if

that's all anybody has, it don't amount to much. Look at old Thad Brockway. It's likely he's worth forty thousand dollars."

"I should rather be in blind Mrs. Simpson's place than his!" exclaimed Ben Goddard.

"Well you might, my boy. She's waiting to have her eyes opened, in heaven, while he — but I won't say anything hard of the poor man. I pity him. Let me tell you, my boy, if you want to make money in a good, honest way, you'll get along better for being a Christian. I've always noticed that; and then the good Book says that 'godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.'"



CHAPTER V.

DORCAS ARMSTRONG'S OFFER.

NOT many days after her visit to the Goddards, Mrs. Merrill was looking from the window, and saw a horse, driven at full speed, coming toward the house. "Why, there's cousin Dorcas!" she exclaimed, in a voice which expressed the utmost surprise. Black Jim swept round the corner and up to the porch in his very best style, proof positive that his mistress held the reins.

"Cousin Dorcas, I'm glad to see you."

"And I'm glad to be seen, or else I shouldn't come. I didn't mean, last time I was here, to come again; but I changed my mind."

While these greetings were exchanged, the visitor had stepped from the wagon and shaken hands with cousin Mary, who said, "You just

hitch your horse, and I'll blow the horn for father. He's somewhere round."

"No need of that," was the reply. "I've come to stay all day, if you'll keep me, and I can take care of Jim myself. I came over to see you and cousin Seth on business."

Her last visit had been made three months before, at which time she had exhausted her powers of persuasion and argument in the vain effort to bring cousin Seth to her way of thinking. She called him a fool for "giving up his property without being obliged to."

"It's just the way with the whole race," she said. "They're always making plans for another world, when they ought to be looking out for this. I believe in being honest; and there can't nobody say that I cheat in weight or measure; but I shan't make a beggar of myself because somebody else wants their debts paid."

"Poor Dorcas! She means better than she talks," Father Merrill was accustomed to say, when speaking of her. "She had a good deal to try her when her father was alive, and

'tan't strange she don't understand about religion."

So he had not been offended when she denounced him in unmeasured terms, declaring that she would never darken his doors until she changed her mind. He had seen her driving down the road, and met her just as she left the stable.

"You see I changed my mind," was her first salutation. "I don't suppose you bear me any ill will. You hadn't ought to, if you can forgive that Ben Goddard. I han't done as bad as he has."

"I give you good will and hearty welcome, cousin Dorcas," responded her host.

"Well, that's enough, — till I ask for more," she made answer, with something like a smile. "You needn't trouble yourself about Jim. I've took care of him. We come over pretty good jog; but I've rubbed him down, so he's all right."

"You've been offered a great price for that horse, cousin Dorcas?"

"Yes; but money won't buy him as long as

I live. Them horse jockeys needn't come round my farm. I'm able to keep Jim, and drive him, too. We've had fine weather for fall work."

"Yes, never better; and I suppose you've improved it?"

"Well, cousin Seth, I've tried. I've had the old pasture cleared of stone, and plowed. I calculate to make a cornfield of that some time."

"You're one of our best farmers, Dorcas. Your crops always turn out well, and your land grows more valuable every year, I'm glad for your good fortune."

"I know you be. I han't forgot that you was the only one that encouraged me to keep the farm, and try to pay off the mortgage. You helped me with money, too; and I han't forgot it, if I be a cross-grained old maid. I've got enough now to take care of myself without being beholden."

When the cousins went in, a fire was burning on the hearth in the west room, the door of which stood invitingly open; but Miss

Armstrong preferred to sit in the kitchen, where she would feel most at home. That she had come for a definite purpose was apparent; yet not until after dinner did she say anything of business.

"You know Daniel Mason's got the western fever," she remarked, by way of introduction.

"I heard he was trying to sell his farm," replied Mr. Merrill.

"Yes, he is. He wants me to buy it, and I don't know but I shall, if you'll come and live on it. That farm might be one of the best in town, if 'twas carried on right. It's good land, and there's plenty of muck in the old swamp. If I had the handling of it, I'd get out a hundred cart loads before winter. I've told Mason so; but he says he don't believe in book farming. His father didn't do anything with the swamp, and he wouldn't. I believe in book farming, common sense, and steady work. That's what tells."

"Yes, yes, cousin Dorcas. I've found it so. Mason ought to made a good living off from that farm. As you say, it's good land.

You've got a mortgage on it now, han't you?"

"Yes; and I mean to own the whole of it, if you'll live on it. That's what started me out to-day, and I hope I han't come for nothing, same as I did last time. You can pay me what you're a mind to for the use of the farm, after you get it in order; but I calculate for a year or two 'twon't much more than give you a living. 'Tan't as pleasant a place as this is; but the house is large enough, and I'll have it repaired before spring. I've got some money I want to put somewhere, and I'd rather put it into that farm than anywhere else. Now, cousin Seth, what do you say? Will you come and live neighbor to me?"

"If mother's willing, I guess I will," was the ready reply. "May be, though, we should want a day or two to make up our minds certain. It's very good in you to think of us, Dorcas. I didn't expect it."

"Well, I expected I should do something, I didn't know exactly what. It's twenty years

now since you said to me, 'Cousin Dorcas, you can just as well keep the farm and work for yourself, as to work for other folks.' I han't forgot that. Then you looked after the mortgage, and promised it should be paid. After all, I han't no right to find fault with what you done for Ben Goddard, and I'm sorry I did. You've always been helping somebody, you and cousin Mary; and you've always lived up to your profession. I'll say that anywhere. You profess to live by the rules of the old Book, and you do. There can't nobody deny that."

"They're good rules, cousin Dorcas. You've followed a good many of them, and that's why you've prospered. It's a wonderful old book, and the more I read it, the more I prize it. It's full of comforting promises from beginning to end. It says, 'Give, and it shall be given back to you.' That's the way mother and me has found it."

"Cousin Dorcas, I wish I could tell you how much I thank you for your kindness," now said Mrs. Merrill. "I've been praying that

the Lord would open a way for us. I always thought that Mason farm was pleasant; and if father thinks best, I shan't make no objection to going there."

The matter was further discussed, and the old people, so strongly urged to decide at once, that before Miss Armstrong started for home, she had the satisfaction of knowing that her purpose was accomplished. She did not stay for supper. She was in too much haste for that; and when the parting words had been exchanged, at a signal from her, black Jim was off like a bird.

The next morning she called upon her neighbor, ready to purchase his farm, and pay the stipulated price within twenty-four hours.

"The sooner the better," replied Daniel Mason, who was smoking lazily in the chimney corner. "Liza wants to stay with her mother this winter, and I'll start for the west as soon as we can move the household stuff. So you can take possession right off; and I hope you won't be sick of your bargain."

The necessary papers were drawn up and

signed, the purchase-money paid, and Dorcas Armstrong became the possessor of a dilapidated house, with a farm of one hundred and fifty acres.

"And you say she paid for it on the spot," said a townsman to Daniel Mason.

"Every dollar," was the reply. "And it's likely to me it didn't take all she'd got laid up neither. I tell you what, she's smart, and as good a neighbor as anybody need to have. I know she don't go to meeting, and don't want to hear nothing about the Bible; but she pays a good minister's tax every year, and there an't a poor woman in town but what she helps. There's Miss Simson, she more'n half supports her; and 'twas she got Miss Hemphill to go and stay with her. There needn't nobody talk to me against Dorcas Armstrong. I don't know but two better Christians than she is, and them's Father Merrill and his wife."

"But I always heard that Dorcas was headstrong when her father was alive. She was a great trial to him."

"And he was a great trial to her," retorted Mr. Mason. If it hadn't been for her there wouldn't been nothing done on the place. He'd want the whole family to sit down and hear him read the Bible and pray two or three hours, when work was driving as it could be. She wouldn't always stop to hear him, and I don't blame her. Father Merrill said he didn't blame her neither, and he's a good judge of such things. Her father thought Lizzie was a dreadful nice girl; but Dorcas was worth a dozen of her; and folks said 'twas Dorcas John Hampstead wanted for a wife, when he began to go to Mr. Armstrong's. She's a rich woman now, and I'm glad of it."

Daniel Mason would do his neighbor justice, praising her thrift and industry, although he had refused to follow her example. He wished to try his fortune in a new place, and within a few days the house which had sheltered his family was tenantless.

Then Dorcas Armstrong made a thorough examination of the premises from garret to cellar. There were heaps of rubbish in various

places, rags, broken crockery, furniture, not worth removing; and, in addition, the usual amount of condemned articles to be found in the garret of every old farm-house. To dispose of these in the shortest possible time, and to the best advantage, was the first consideration, and in deciding upon this, the owner called to her assistance the boy and girl who were her most devoted servants and her most sincere admirers.

Brother and sister, the children of intemperate parents, they had never known a home until they found one with the woman who had been their best and truest friend.

Henry Wyman could tell the capacity of an old chair or table at the first glance, and, what was of more consequence, he could make either nearly as good as new. Whatever he condemned was to be burned, and under such efficient management the house was soon cleared, while a great quantity of lumber was ready to be conveyed to the boy's workshop.

"I don't see how folks can afford to throw away such things," said Henry.

"They can't afford it," was the reply. "They do it because they're too shiftless to mend them up. Everything on the farm has gone just so. The fences are tumbling down, and the barns need shingling. I tell you what, children, we've got to work lively to get things fixed up for our new neighbors. All the old trash that's good for anything we'll give away; but I an't going to have so much as a cobweb left that belonged to Daniel Mason."

Maggie Wyman made herself useful in various ways, running with tireless feet, and peering with sharp eyes into hidden corners. One day's work accomplished much; but so much remained to be done, that one less energetic than Dorcas Armstrong would have been discouraged. With the means at her command, however, good progress had been made, when Mr. and Mrs. Merrill rode over to see the place.

"We've got a tight roof on the house and barn, and we're going to patch up the sheds," said their owner. "I want you to look over the farm, and see if what we've done suits you."

Some of the neighbors think I'm just about wild; but that's nothing new."

Mr. Merrill approved of all she had done, predicting that the farm would yet do her great credit. "Then you'll be willing to live on it," she added, a little anxiously.

"I shall be glad to live on it," was his reply. "I begin to think of it as home already, and I've no doubt the Lord will prosper us. He always has, and some way it seems as though I was nearer to him than ever before. It's a great thing to have the Lord on our side. He's helped you through a good many hard places, cousin Dorcas."

"I've got through a good many," she responded. "But I've worked hard for it. Folks can't get along much without hard work."

Mrs. Merrill examined the house and surroundings, mentally arranging her furniture, and locating her beds of flowers and sweet herbs. "It's further from meeting than where we live now; but that's about all there is to say against the place," she remarked to her husband, as they were driving home. "We

must try and have some meetings at our house. There an't many folks in the neighborhood that get out Sundays, and we must see what we can do. I know there's some excuse for Dorcas feeling as she does ; but she'll have a good deal to answer for. Her example keeps others back from doing their duty. Why, them children han't been to meeting since they've lived with her, though they've got clothes good enough to wear, and she don't allow them to work Sundays any more than we should. They've got more books than most any other children, and Dorcas says they shall have all they want, as long as they live with her."

"Yes ; Henry told me about their books," replied Mr. Merrill. "The minister selected them, and he's going to buy more the next time he goes to the city. Dorcas says she wouldn't trust anybody else ; but she don't want them to hear him preach."

"Don't they want to go, father?"

"Henry said he did sometimes, though he never says anything about it to her. She's

been so good to him and Maggie that they want to please her. He's a good, smart boy, and Dorcas trains him pretty much by Bible rules. Perhaps there's a work for us to do in that neighborhood, mother, and the Lord's took his own way to set us about it. We must magnify the religion of Jesus to cousin Dorcas. She see enough of what her father called religion in her young days ; but she don't know much about the right kind. There's a providence in all that's happened to us, mother, and may be we shall live to thank God for having to change homes in our old age."

During the winter, people who visited Mr. and Mrs. Merrill for the purpose of sympathizing with them in the loss of their property, found small need for words of consolation. Their cheerfulness was a wonder to all ; and if some tears flowed as they bade adieu to their pleasant home, they were carefully concealed, even from each other.

The moving was effected some days before Mr. Murray was to take possession of his pur-

chase, and in all the town there was not a cleaner house than that the doors of which were thrown open to receive the old people. Dorcas Armstrong, with every member of her family, was ready to welcome them, and assist in any necessary work. Nothing was wanting for their comfort which it was possible for their kinswoman to supply. Everything bore testimony to the labor of efficient and willing hands; and it was not long before the tenants felt quite at home in their new quarters.

Pleasant surprises awaited them, among which not the least pleasant was the return of Star and Bright, a pair of favorite oxen, which Mr. Merrill had sold with his farm, and which Mr. Murray begged he would accept as some compensation for extra work done the previous autumn. Then another cow was added to their stock, this being a present from Ben and Dell Goddard, who were delighted to give some expression of their gratitude.

Betsy, the girl who had assisted in kitchen and dairy for several years, went with them,

and the hired man, after a great deal of complaining, showed his good sense at last by engaging with Father Merrill for another year, promising to do his "level best." "We'll let folks see that we han't started on the road to the poor-house just yet," he remarked to Betsy, after telling her what they proposed to do out of doors.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE MURRAYS.

HAVING grain and the silken tassels of the corn made beautiful hitherto neglected fields. Clover bloom perfumed the air, and sleek, well-fed cattle grazed in the pastures. The wonderful crops were just Father Merrill's luck, as many averred, who, but a few months before, had pitied him for his conscientiousness.

There was a ready market for all he wished to sell. The butter was as sweet and golden, and the cheese as finely flavored, as had ever come from Mrs. Merrill's dairy. They acknowledged God's hand in all this, thankful for the blessings which crowned their lives.

Every Sabbath they drove past their old home, looking eagerly to see what changes had

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been made; but with never a sigh for their lost possessions. They missed attending the evening meetings; yet solaced themselves with the anticipation of a neighborhood meeting they would establish, somewhat later in the season.

In all this time Mother Merrill had not visited Mrs. Murray. Perhaps she dared not trust herself to do this, lest she might be quite overcome by the sight of dear, familiar places; and her husband was not one to urge her beyond her own wishes. Every one spoke of the sick lady as being gentle and uncomplaining, although she was seldom seen to smile.

Mr. Stearns, the clergyman, who had called upon Mr. Murray's family as a matter of courtesy, never saw any one of them in his congregation on the Sabbath; and it was soon understood that the gentleman did not believe in church going. He counted this as a puritanical practice, which a more enlightened age should discard. He believed in the God of Nature, the spirit of the beautiful, and the pervading presence of a mystic power, which, undefined and unseen, was yet ever active.

Not that he obtruded his opinions upon others, or sought to influence those outside his own family. He was too well bred, and, if I may be allowed the expression, too good a man to do this. If others were happier for their simple belief in old dogmas, he would not take from them their happiness. Mr. Stearns, being a neighbor, was the recipient of many favors, while all mooted questions were carefully avoided. In the house, where God's word had been daily studied, there was now but a single copy of the Bible, occupying a place with other old books.

"If I'd known Mr. Murray was such a man, I don't know as I should thought 'twas right for me to sell to him," said Father Merrill to his wife, after having assured himself that the reports he had heard were true. "Mr. Stearns says there an't no chance to argue with him; and likely to me that wouldn't do any good. He knows both sides. I wish you'd go over and see his wife some time, mother. If she's going to die she'll need a Saviour, and may be you could help her find him."

"I'll go to-morrow," was the quick reply. "I don't know as I've done right to stay away so long, but —"

"I know, mother," interrupted her husband; "but God's hand has led us."

"Yes, father," responded the wife, "He knows what's best, and I've no reason to complain."

Mrs. Merrill thought little of outward adorning, for its own sake; yet her delicate taste and rare sense of fitness manifested themselves in her style of dress. A soft gray silk, becomingly made, with muslins of the finest and clearest, made her look the real lady that she was. No one would think of calling her "countryfied," as she stood waiting to be admitted to the house of which she was the happy mistress for so many years.

"I would like to see Mrs. Murray, if she is able to see me," she said to a servant who opened the door.

"Please to come in, and I will speak to her," was the reply. "It's Mrs. Merrill, isn't it?"

"That's my name," she answered, following

her conductor into the old parlor, which was so changed that she would not have recognized it.

She had hardly seated herself, when the servant returned to say that Mrs. Murray would be happy to see her; and crossing the hall, she entered a room furnished with everything necessary for the comfort of an invalid. Pictures adorned the walls, and a vase filled with flowers occupied a central position on the table, which was strewn with magazines and papers.

The occupant of this room rose to receive her guest; extending her hand cordially, as she said, "I have wished to see you ever since we came here. Thank you for coming. Let me take your bonnet; you will be so much more comfortable without it."

"Thank you, dear," answered Mrs. Merrill. "You sit right down, and let me wait on myself. I've come to stay with you an hour or two, if you'd like to have me."

"Certainly I should," was the reply. "This is one of my best days, and I have been wishing for somebody to talk with."

Friendly relations thus established, it was not long before the visitor was inquiring, in a motherly way, in regard to the health of her companion; and from this subject they drifted to others, until Mrs. Murray said, impulsively, "I don't see how you could ever have left this beautiful place. Pardon me for referring to it," she added; "but I have been told that you might have kept it notwithstanding Mr. Goddard's failure."

"Folks said we could," replied Mrs. Merrill. "They said there was some way of cheating the law; but father and me meant to keep a clear conscience in the sight of God. 'Twas hard, after we'd lived here so many years, but 'twas right. I'm glad you like the place, and I hope you'll be happy here. I've been very happy in this house."

"You haven't any children, Mrs. Merrill."

"No, dear. We had six, but God took them all home."

"Didn't it break your heart?"

"It would if God hadn't sustained us by his grace. We calculated to depend upon our

children in our old age, but it won't so to be. We expect to meet them all in heaven, and I think we've reason. So it don't make much difference which goes first, if we only all get there safe. You have children, Mrs. Murray?"

"Two," answered the invalid. "They are away from home now. I had another, my oldest. He died five years ago, when he was fifteen; and since then I haven't seen a happy day. It almost killed me to lose him. It didn't seem right for him to die, when he was so young," said the bereaved mother.

"But it *was* right, else God wouldn't taken him," responded Mrs. Merrill. "Our heavenly Father does not afflict willingly, or grieve the children of men. It's all for some wise purpose, though we can't see it."

"And you believe God takes our friends from us, Mrs. Merrill?"

"Yes, I believe God does everything. Don't you believe it?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Murray replied; and her despairing tone expressed more of doubt than did her words. "If I was sure, I could

bear almost anything. But this uncertainty kills me. My Harry believed in God. We had an old Scotch woman living with us, who read the Bible and prayed, and when he was sick he wanted her with him all the time; and when they were alone together I knew they talked of things the rest of us didn't understand. At last, Harry said he was perfectly happy, and ready to die, although he was so weak he could only whisper a word now and then. Only a few minutes before he died, he drew me down to him, and whispered, 'Elsbeth will tell you all about it; and you and father must believe her. I know it's true, for I see the "King in his glory."' My husband said he didn't realize what he said; but it seemed to me then that he did, and it has always seemed so to me since."

"I presume he did see the King in his glory, as he told you, Mrs. Murray. Departing spirits see with clearer vision than we can; and sometimes it seems as though the veil was lifted for them while they're in the flesh. Did the old woman tell you what give your boy so much comfort?"

"No, Mrs. Merrill, she didn't. I wasn't allowed to see her. My husband said it wasn't best that I should, and he forbade my talking about Harry's death. But I have told you, and it has done me good. Perhaps you know the same old Elspeth did."

"And where is she?" asked Mrs. Merrill, eagerly, overlooking for the moment the woman before her.

"I don't know," was the reply. "My husband says she is well provided for, and has a good home. He never crossed me in anything but this, Mrs. Merrill; and when we were first married, I promised to think as he did about religion. But I can't now for all my promise, though I don't know what to believe."

The visitor knew not what reply to make to this communication; and perhaps it was well that Mr. Murray came in, thus relieving her from the necessity. He expressed quite as much pleasure at seeing her as his wife had previously done; and when she rose to leave, urged her to repeat her visit at an early day.

One thing was wanting in that household.

There was intelligence, refinement, and taste, but with all these, it lacked the crowning grace of religion. The husband and father, generous, chivalrous, and affectionate, yet with his own hands barred the pearly gates against those he loved. He well nigh worshiped his wife and children, withholding from them no earthly good it was in his power to bestow. Strangely blinded must he have been, to dwarf their lives by denying to them a faith in things unseen and eternal.

However it may be ridiculed by flippant speakers or writers, it is nevertheless true, that faith in God, as the supreme ruler of the universe, and the wise disposer of all events, is the great motive power of the world. In the hour of national peril and threatened disaster, instinctively each heart exclaims, "God reigns;" and because of this universal confidence, each true hand deals sturdier blows for right and justice.

Mr. Murray was no exception to the general rule, notwithstanding his boasted freedom from superstitious beliefs. He regarded the Sab-

bath as a day of rest, because the physical well being of man and beast demanded this; yet never did the church bells ring out their peals, but he remembered the old commandment he had learned at his mother's knee.

Well might Mr. Murray say that he knew both sides. He had been taught the one in his boyhood, he had investigated the other in the early days of his manhood. His father was one who contemned religion, while his mother was a Christian; and it was the memory of the many differences, resulting from this conflict of opinions, which prompted him to ask from his wife the promise, that in matters of religion he should be the umpire.

She was but little more than a child when she gave this promise, realizing nothing of its true import. At the time, she had no religious feelings or preferences. A pretty, thoughtless girl, in a home where only worldly interests were considered, it was no sacrifice for her, when she gave her hand to the man she loved, to give with it the keeping of her soul's interests. And he dared to accept this trust, assuring her that all would be well.

She was a happy wife and mother; her heart stirred to new emotions by new hopes and responsibilities. She looked out upon the world. Somewhere within it would be the homes of her children, if so be their lives were spared. She saw the temptations which would surround them, the obstacles which would obstruct their paths, and cried, in very agony, "Is there no safeguard, no sure word of prophecy, to which they may take heed?"

They who have been taught to cast all their burdens upon the Lord, can hardly imagine the utter helplessness and vague longings of a soul struggling to bear its burdens alone. Mrs. Murray appealed to her husband; but, alas! he could only assure her that he would care for all.

Harry, her first born child, and the idol of her heart, was soon to leave home and enter school preparatory for college. Her love for him made her clear sighted as to the dangers to which he would be exposed, and in her poor way she endeavored to fortify him against them. She was not very wise, but the noble

boy listened to her, and promised that he would never do anything to grieve her.

About this time the illness of a younger child, and the difficulty of obtaining help, led her to engage the services of Elspeth Bawn, an old Scotch woman, who was a most devoted Christian and skillful nurse. Her quaint speech and manners soon attracted Harry Murray. He loved to listen to her stories of Scotch life, and her comments upon the new country, as she called America. Her old Bible, also, with its metred version of the Psalms, and its family records, were to him objects of interest. He learned from her more of God's truth than he had heard before in his whole life; and it was well that it should be so. His brother recovered; but he was prostrated with the same disease, and died.

Since his death, Mrs. Murray had not seen old Elspeth, although it seemed to her that talking with this woman would be almost like seeing her boy again. Her husband saw fit to prevent their meeting, yet his gratitude to the faithful nurse was manifested in most substan-

tial manner. She was the recipient of a yearly gift, which added much to the comforts of her life, and quickened her faith to pray for the giver.

During the years succeeding his bereavement, Mr. Murray had said less of his peculiar tenets. He was not so confident in his own judgment, not quite so certain that he could answer for the souls of his family.

His younger son, Brent, was not such a boy as Harry had been. Impatient of restraint, and demanding the reason of every assertion, he proposed to think for himself on all subjects. There would be for him no middle ground. As a thoroughly good man, or a thoroughly bad man, he would bless or curse the generation in which he lived. A fine scholar, ambitious and eager, he bade fair to excel in all intellectual pursuits. He had not yet seen his country home, but he was coming late in the autumn to spend the winter. His sister, too, would take a vacation from school; and they promised themselves much pleasure in winter sports and winter sights.



CHAPTER VII.

FATHER MERRILL'S PRAYER MEETING.

AS may be supposed, Mrs. Merrill's heart was deeply moved by what she had heard, and going down the long walk, bordered with pinks which she had set and trimmed, she scarcely noticed them. She prayed for the woman she had just left; yet her thoughts scarcely took definite form, and walking on, as if in a dream, she passed the house of Mr. Stearns without observing it.

"Why, Mother Merrill, an't you coming in to see me?" called the minister's good wife.

"Yes, dear, yes. I was so busy thinking that I didn't mind where I was," she replied.

"You've been to the old place," said Mrs. Stearns, when her visitor was comfortably seated. "You found pleasant people; but

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they don't make your place good. I'm glad you came over to-day, I have so many things to ask you; and I'm glad you went to see Mrs. Murray. Perhaps I'm mistaken; but it always seems to me as though that woman had some secret grief."

"Perhaps so," was the reply. "I wish she was a Christian. I'm sorry to have anybody live there that don't help support the gospel. That property was dedicated to the Lord."

"I know it was, Mrs. Merrill; and perhaps Mr. Murray knows it. I don't suppose he would be guilty of helping to support the minister; but he remembers us very kindly. He furnishes Mr. Stearns with a great deal of reading, and often sends in fruit and vegetables. Another thing in his favor. There's no more work done on that place on the Sabbath, than there was when you lived there."

"I've heard so," answered Mrs. Merrill. "And I must say that we was never treated any better, by anybody, than Mr. Murray. We've had a part of all the plums and pears, and yesterday he sent over a barrel of them

lemon pippins I always thought so much of. We've had a good deal to thank him for."

The children coming in, nothing more was said of the new neighbors. Mr. Stearns and Father Merrill soon joined the company, and conversation became general. There was no need of haste on the part of the guests. It had been a leisure afternoon; and as the moon was at its full, they were persuaded to prolong their visit into the evening.

"How soon do you propose to commence your meetings?" asked the clergyman, in an interval of quiet.

"I'm thinking about it for next week," was the reply. "I don't expect we shall have many at first; but 'twon't do to despise the day of small things. I'm going to invite the young folks after we get started, and there an't many that'll want to refuse me. We're going to begin in our kitchen, so's to have it seem more home-like. Mother thinks that's the best way."

"Will Miss Armstrong attend?"

"I don't expect she will; but I mean to

have the children there. I know how they feel, and it's partly on their account that I want to begin as soon as we can. Dorcas says they can do as they're a mind to about going to meeting when they're older; but they shan't be driven to hear a prayer or a sermon as long as they live with her. She don't believe in that. There's a good deal of excuse for Dorcas. If her father wan't crazy, he was shiftless, and made his zeal in religion a cloak for his laziness. I never had much patience with him myself, and I didn't wonder that Dorcas got tired of his long-winded prayers and preachments."

This was a severe speech for Father Merrill to make; but Jerry Armstrong had been a sore trial to him. A poor man, every year growing poorer, lamenting that the hand of the Lord was laid heavily upon him because of the sins of his family, he neglected his farm until, but for the energy of his younger daughter, there would have been no food upon their table. His wife died, his elder daughter married, and then there remained but these two.

In vain Seth Merrill reasoned with the indolent man, urging him to lead a more consistent Christian life, quoting passage after passage of Scripture to prove that thrift and industry were not only acceptable in the sight of God, but positive duties. As well might he talk to the changeless hills. It was a delicate task to counsel the daughter. She must act in opposition to her father, or their home would be broken up. She could earn her support elsewhere; but no door was opened to him. So she struggled on until his death, which occurred when she was twenty-one years of age.

Since then she had proved herself a good manager and industrious worker. But the old prejudice remained. In all the twenty years, she had not listened to a sermon, except at funerals, or heard a prayer, except upon these occasions, and when she had been present at morning or evening worship in some Christian family.

There were those who condemned her without mercy, counting her worse than an infidel for her unwomanly contempt of sacred things;

and sometimes, in the moods which would occasionally steal over her, she pitied herself for being so unlike those whom she most respected. She had her ideal of what a Christian life should be, and this was fully realized in her cousins.

At first she had been angry that they would not retain their home, even at the sacrifice of extreme principles; but she did not long indulge this feeling. The cheerfulness with which they accepted their present position was an eloquent sermon, and her regard for them increased with each succeeding day. It was such a pleasure to see them, such a happiness to know that she had in any way contributed to their comfort. Her own home seemed less lonely since they were near.

She pleased herself with fancying what manner of woman she might have been had she been the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Merrill. Would she be a Christian, attending public worship, and with others commemorating the death of Him who died to save the world? Would she have been better, happier,

loving the old Bible she had carefully concealed, hoping thus to forget it?

She had more leisure for thinking, now that her fortune was assured, and work was not for her an actual necessity. The children, growing up in her home, relieved her of many cares; and yet these same children increased her perplexities. She provided for them liberally in all things. They attended school when school was in session. She taught them herself, so far as she was able, impressing upon them the need of moral and mental culture.

Here she stopped. If they had asked the privilege of attending church, she would have granted it; as they did not, she was careful to provide them with profitable reading, and in various ways make the Sabbath a pleasant day.

Before Mr. Merrill came into the neighborhood, not one family passed her house on the way to church. Those who lived two or three miles beyond took advantage of a cross-road to shorten the distance to the village, and thus it had been comparatively easy for Dorcas

Armstrong to ignore the duty of public worship. It was different now, when every Sabbath morning three at least started early from Mr. Merrill's for the house of God.

The children watched them going and returning, happy if a smile or a bow acknowledged the attention. As the summer advanced, they were invited to spend Sabbath evenings with the old people; and these visits were considered the rarest pleasures of the week. Never questioning how they spent the time, Miss Armstrong was glad to have them go, since thus she felt relieved of some responsibility.

She was not unconscious of the influences silently at work around her. The proposed prayer meeting had been mentioned in her presence, and she did not doubt that she would be asked to attend it. Of course she would not go. It would be too irksome, and in direct opposition to her principles. This was her decision when she had well considered the matter. She must continue to act in accordance with her principles.

The very next day these principles were put to the test. Soon after dinner, Mrs. Merrill came over, bringing her knitting, thus giving notice that she proposed to stop for a while. Maggie had met her at some distance from the house, assuring her of a welcome which cousin Dorcas was ready to give. It was no difficult task to persuade her to remain to tea; and while Maggie was laying the table, she improved the opportunity to invite her hostess to attend the prayer meeting.

"I an't going to urge you," said the good woman, gently. "But I *do* hope you'll want to come. Your example would help so much in the neighborhood, and there's something needed to make the people better. You've complained a good many times because the Sabbath an't kept any better."

"I know I have," answered Dorcas, quickly. "The folks the other side of the hill an't no better than heathen, and I hope you'll do something for them. It's likely to me they never heard much preaching nor praying. I didn't hear much else till after I was twenty

years old, and — I can't help it, cousin Mary, if you do think I'm dreadful wicked — I heard all I ever want to."

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Merrill made answer. "I've always been sorry for you, and so has father. There's such a thing as making religion seem different from what it really is, and I'm afraid you're too much prejudiced, cousin Dorcas. Wouldn't it be a good plan for you to study the Bible for yourself, and ask God to show you the truth?"

A variety of expressions flitted across the face of the woman thus addressed. She could not be angry, although this subject was one she never discussed. She asked no pity for the unfortunate conditions of her childhood; yet she could not reject the sympathy which had been offered. Her judgment answered "yes" to the question asked, but her will forbade its expression.

It was long before she answered, and then in a deprecating tone. "You know we don't think alike about these things, cousin Mary. I an't sorry you're going to have a prayer

meeting; but you mustn't expect me to come. I hope there'll be good done. I'd do most anything else to please you and cousin Seth; and I'll be honest enough to own that your religion is different from what I heard about when I was young."

"It's Christ's religion I want you to have, not ours, cousin Dorcas. And you must let me ask you one more question. Are you willing the children should come to the prayer meeting?"

"To be sure I am," was the quick reply. "They can go if they want to, and they could go to meeting Sundays for all me. They've got to live for themselves. I an't going to take their souls into my hands. I've tried to do my duty by them children."

"You've done well by them, cousin Dorcas. Everybody says that, and it's to your credit they're so good. Father says Henry's as good a boy as he knows of, and Maggie wouldn't do anything wrong if she knew it. I'm glad you'll let them come to the prayer meeting."

"Why, cousin Mary, did you think I wouldn't? I hope I an't quite a heathen."

"No, no, Dorcas," Mrs. Merrill hastened to say, just as the door was opened by Maggie, who had done what she could in preparing for supper.

A happy group gathered around the table, and the visit was a pleasant one, notwithstanding it was not wholly successful.

"We can't expect Dorcas to change all at once," said Father Merrill, when told how much she had acknowledged. "'Twas a good deal for her to say what she did about the children. They'll go to meeting before long now, and go looking as well as other children."

Every family in the neighborhood was invited to attend the prayer meeting, and, of course, every family talked about it. "I wouldn't go a step for anybody else," remarked one and another. "But father and mother Merrill are so good, it seems too bad not to do as they want us to."

So it was that a larger company assembled than had been expected, while those who

staid away felt obliged to make some excuse for their absence. A good deacon and two or three Christian women were present; besides whom, and the members of the family, there were none who professed to care for religion.

Mrs. Merrill and Betsy had selected several familiar hymns; and the singing of these occupied so much time, that it might well have been called a praise meeting. Nearly all could join in the singing, and thus weariness was avoided. The Bible was read, appropriate remarks made, and prayers offered. The meeting proved a success; and another was appointed, to which the young people were especially invited.

Dorcas Armstrong's hired man was there, and as he walked home with the children, they talked of what they had heard. "Didn't you like it?" asked Maggie, eagerly; and without waiting for a reply, continued, "Seems to me I never had so good a time before. I mean to go every night, don't you, Henry?"

"Yes, if I can," was the reply. "I wish aunt Dorcas would go with us. I don't like to leave her at home all alone."

"Don't trouble yourself about her," said the hired man. "She's able to take care of herself any time, and she don't want to hear about such things. She's a good woman, though, and there shan't nobody say she an't when I'm round."

"I didn't say she an't good," exclaimed Maggie, somewhat troubled by the severe tone of her companion.

"I know it, child. Folks that live with Dorcas Armstrong don't complain of her. Some of them church members might take pattern by her; but there's Father Merrill and his wife, most too good to live. There was some folks at the meeting I shouldn't thought of seeing. Them boys, now, didn't know no more how to behave than so many wild Injuns."

"I guess they liked the singing," said Henry.

"I guess they did," was the reply. "They had their mouths open wide enough to take it all in."

This remark was made as they turned toward the house, and after this nothing more

was said of the meeting. No questions were asked; and whatever Dorcas Armstrong may have thought, she was careful not to betray the least curiosity.

Yet, long after the other members of the family were sleeping, she tossed restlessly upon her bed. She recalled cousin Mary's question, "Wouldn't it be best to study the Bible for yourself, and ask God to show you the truth?"

She had found farming very different from what her father had represented it to be. Indeed, in all business matters she acted in direct opposition to his maxims and expressed opinions. That he had been a poor farmer, was no reason why she should sneer at agricultural pursuits; yet, because he had been a poor Christian, she affected to despise all religion. It was her pride to show people that there was "one Armstrong who could do as much as other folks;" and the happiest day of her life was that on which she paid the last dollar of the "old mortgage." Now she asked no favors. On the contrary, it was her privilege to bestow favors upon others.

Once in her life she had wished that she was a Christian. A poor woman, a stranger in the neighborhood, was taken sick, and with her children was dependent upon charity. Miss Armstrong visited her, carrying many needed comforts, and watching by her bed many a long night. During one of these night watches, the sick woman, looking up wistfully into the face of her companion, said, "I wish you'd pray with me. I want somebody to pray for me and my children. I an't fit to die, and I don't deserve to get well."

"I can't pray. I never pray," was the unwelcome reply.

"Nor I neither; but I thought you did, you're so good. Seems as though 'twould make me feel better if I could hear somebody pray."

Dorcas prided herself upon being a skillful nurse; but here she was at fault. In the kindness of her heart she wished she was a Christian, so that she might pray with this poor woman; and never afterward did she stand by one who was nigh to death, without

being conscious of a vague desire to minister to the wants of the soul as well as to those of the body.

How all these experiences came back to her as she vainly tried to forget them ! How Bible truths and Bible words sounded in her ears ! Perhaps no other was so much influenced by the prayer meeting as she. She hoped to hear nothing in regard to it ; but only the next day an old man, who delighted in telling news, came into her house, and despite her indifferent manner, when the subject was broached, entertained her for more than an hour with an account of Father Merrill's meeting.

"'Twan't like no meetin' I ever went to afore," he said, at length. "'Peared to me 'twas most all singin', and bein' happy, and tellin' about our blessins'. Father Merrill said we'd ought to be glad all the time, and thankful for every streak of sunshine and drop of rain. He said God made all on't ; and don't you think now, he said, Christ died to save every poor creetur, just as much as though there want nobody else in the world ; and he

knows us all by name. I couldn't help wonderin' if he remembers old Veezy Butterworth. S'pose he does, Dorcas ?"

"It's likely he does," she answered shortly. "But if you want to know more about it you'd better ask cousin Seth. He understands such things."

"Well, you see if I should go to him he'd think I was under concern of mind ; and I an't justly that, though what I heard last night set me to thinkin'. But then I've managed to get along so fur without much religion, and I guess I can weather it through. That's what I told mother last night ; and, says I, 'There's Dorcas Armstrong didn't go nigh the meetin'. She's got a good understandin' of things ; so I guess we needn't be riled up as long as she an't.'"

"Mr. Butterworth, that an't no way to talk," exclaimed the excited woman. "You needn't pin your faith on me. I've a right to do as I'm a mind to, and we've all got to look out for ourselves. I han't no objection to the meetin', and the rest of my folks went."

"Well, 'twas a good meetin'," responded the old man, half forgetting his last remark. "I'm glad we've got such good folks for neighbors. 'Twas the best job you ever done when you bought that farm, and you won't be none the poorer for it. It seems as though them folks was just blessed of the Lord everywhere. Now there's Ben Goddard, runnin' his mill and makin' money like house-a-fire, and Father Merrill at the bottom of it all." The speaker's ideas were somewhat confused, but it was evident that the consistent piety of his neighbors was the inspiring theme.

"Cousin Seth has always been helping somebody ever since I can remember," said Dorcas Armstrong. "He helped me when there wouldn't anybody else; and I hope the folks round here will learn something from him."

"So do I, and I guess we shall if he keeps up the meetins. There's goin' to be another next week, and mother's goin' to try and git there. Good day, Dorcas. I guess it's time I was joggin' along."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Butterworth. I want to send something to your wife."

This something was only a small package; but for it the old man expressed much gratitude. "You're a good woman to remember poor folks," he said, kindly. "We've had a good many favors from you, and I han't a doubt but you'll be rewarded some time. Mother'll be dreadful glad of some tea. She'll git to meetin' now. Shan't ye go next time, Dorcas?"

"I don't expect to," was the reply.

"Well, good day. Perhaps you'll change yer mind afore then. 'Twas a good meetin'."

Mr. Butterworth had intended to make some other calls before returning home; but the package intrusted to him prevented this. He passed the house of Father Merrill without stopping, although he wished to ask some questions which he was sure could there be answered.

As for the woman, whose kindness was proverbial, neither her hired man nor the children spoke to her of the prayer meeting, until the appointed evening, when Henry asked if he and Maggie could go.

"Yes, you can go every night, without saying more about it," she replied. "I've staid alone too much in my life to care about it now. I can always find enough to do to keep me from being lonesome."

Nevertheless she found solitude irksome; and in her restless mood went to the door, where she could hear, now and then, a strain of music. Many voices joined to swell the song which floated out upon the still night air, and involuntarily she hummed the old familiar tune she had learned in her childhood.

Not to any human being would she have acknowledged that her heart was touched; but God knew that the deep fountains of feeling were stirred.



CHAPTER VIII.

BRENT MURRAY'S ACCIDENT.

BRENT MURRAY and his sister Jenny were at home exploring the resources of the country town, and half dissatisfied with their surroundings. To one, these were "slow;" to the other, "dull."

The invalid mother roused herself, to make an effort for the entertainment of her children; but so much did she suffer in consequence, that they begged her not to think of them; yet how could she avoid thinking of them? Even as she lay upon her couch, with closed eyes, she saw them constantly before her. She studied their faces, recalled their words, and sought thus to read their characters.

For Jennie she felt no particular anxiety,

but there was a recklessness in the manners of her son which troubled her. The flashing of his eye at the slightest reproof, warned her of danger. He was not like Harry, who, while winning admiration for sterner qualities, was yet gentle and tender. True, Brent loved his mother, pitied her for her sufferings, and was willing to make some sacrifices for her, if he could do this in his own way. He had been at home scarcely two weeks, when he repented of his wish to spend the winter in such a place, and desired his father to allow him to return to school.

"No, Brent, you will stay here," was the reply. "You need a quiet winter, and you can pursue your studies here as well as at school. Our neighbor, Mr. Stearns, is a fine scholar, and I can make arrangements with him to hear you recite." This was said decidedly, Mr. Murray looking full in the face of his son, who dared not rebel against the decision. "I have avoided speaking to you upon the subject; but your conduct the past year has not satisfied me. You have been laying the foun-

dations for a miserable life. Your habits are not what they should be, and it is time for an entire change. We have expected great things of you, and it will break your mother's heart if you disappoint her."

The boy was angry that his father should thus address him, angry that his habits had been reported, and more angry still that he could not express his indignation. He went in search of Jennie, whom he accused of having betrayed him, specifying some occurrences not at all to his credit.

"Why, Brent Murray, I never knew you were so wicked!" she exclaimed. "How could I tell father, when I didn't know it myself! I thought you were real good, only I knew you had an awful temper when you were a little boy. You used to strike me, and order me round; but I didn't suppose you were like that now. You'd better go back to father, and tell him all the bad things you have done, and ask him to make you a better boy."

As you may imagine, Jennie would not meekly bear injustice from her brother.

Shocked by what he had unwittingly revealed; she shrank from him; which, being apparent, he said, angrily, "I didn't come to you for advice."

"I know it, Brent," she answered. "But don't let us quarrel. There are only two of us, and we ought to be good friends now that mother is able to have us at home again. Yesterday she talked about brother Harry, and told me how good he was. Don't you remember, Brent?"

"Yes, Jennie, I do; and sometimes I wish I was like him."

"I wish you were," she replied, earnestly. "Mother says he never did anything to trouble her. You *will* be good, won't you?" added the high-spirited, but affectionate girl, throwing her arms around her brother's neck and kissing him.

"I'll try, Jen," he said, furtively brushing away a tear. "I don't mean to do anything very bad; but a fellow does things sometimes that he's sorry for afterward."

"Then why don't you say so right out?"



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asked his sister. "Tell father you are sorry, and he won't blame you half so much. Come, now, that's a good brother; and tell mother too. She looks at you as though she was just ready to cry; and now you can make her very happy."

Brent Murray was not so hardened that he could hear these appeals unmoved; but he could and did resist them. In school he had many companions who sympathized with him in his ideas of manly independence, and fostered the reckless spirit which threatened his ruin. Here in the quiet village which Father Merrill had blessed by his presence and influence, there was not one whom he considered a desirable associate. There were two or three near his own age, who, with some training, might be made tolerable, but who were now quite too straitlaced to suit him.

When everything failed at home, his only resource was horseback riding; and after his conversation with Jennie he started for a long ride, not caring where, or in what direction. By chance he took the road leading

past Dorcas Armstrong's farm, and was just opposite her house, when his horse, fretted by his nervous, irritable control, threw him upon the ground with such force that he was completely stunned.

A woman's voice soothed the restive animal, and then the speaker turned her attention to the prostrate boy. "Served him right," she muttered between her teeth, as she stooped to raise his head. "Maggie, bring me some water, quick."

The first drops which fell upon the white face quickened the faintly throbbing pulse, and Brent Murray opened his eyes, only to close them again, while his unknown friend continued to bathe his forehead. At length he attempted to lift his head from her lap.

"Better keep still till you're stronger," she said, commandingly; and then, seeing Henry Wyman, she added, in the same tone, "Take that horse into the yard, and give him a good rubbing down. It's a shame for a horse to be abused so."

The owner of the horse heard this order,

with the implied accusation, and endeavored to make some response, but his strength was not equal to the effort. Somewhat longer Dorcas Armstrong watched him, before saying, "Now, I guess, we might as well find out how much you're hurt. If there's any bones broke, we'll carry you into the house. Here, Hiram," she continued, calling to the hired man, who was making his way toward them, "we want some of your help."

With assistance the boy was able to stand; and it was ascertained that no bones were broken, although he was sorely bruised and sadly bewildered. "It's the first time I was ever thrown from a horse," he said, feebly.

"You deserved it. I watched you coming down the road, and I was glad when your horse threw you off. I'm always glad to see folks punished for abusing a horse."

Brent Murray found it difficult to comprehend his situation. There was nothing harsh or disagreeable in the voice which condemned him, yet he would not have presumed to plead his cause against it.

"He'd better come into the house, anyway," said Hiram.

"So he had," was the reply. "Henry, you make a fire in the south room, and then put the horse in the stable."

This was soon accomplished; and the young stranger found himself in a pleasant room, where he lay as in a dream. From time to time his hostess appeared, looking at him for a moment, and then leaving him to rest.

Meanwhile Father Merrill had stopped on his way to the village, and recognizing the horse as one which had been purchased by Mr. Murray, was at no loss in regard to its rider. Again Dorcas Armstrong expressed her indignation at the abuse of the noble animal, accompanying this with an assertion that she was glad the accident had occurred.

"I'm sorry for it all," answered Mr. Merrill. "Such accidents sometimes prove serious. I guess I'll go in and see the boy. It's Mr. Murray's boy, an't it?" said the old gentleman, as he drew a chair to the couch on which Brent was reclining.

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

"Are you much hurt?"

"No, sir, I don't think I am. I am a little bruised, and my head feels strangely. I wish you would please to tell me where I am."

"You are in Miss Dorcas Armstrong's house, and I am Father Merrill."

"The gentleman who used to live where we do?"

"Yes, the very same. You han't been at home long?"

"No, sir; but I have heard of you, and I saw you pass one day."

"I am going that way now; and if you was able, you could ride right along with me," said the kind old man.

"I don't know whether I could ride or not," answered Brent. "I'll see how strong I am." He raised his head from the pillow, but the next moment it fell back heavily, while a deathly pallor overspread his face. Riding home, in his present condition, was simply impossible.

"You'd better make yourself contented

where you be," said his hostess. "I don't bear you no ill will, and I'm reckoned a good nurse; so I guess we can get along together without any trouble."

Brent Murray looked up to the face of the speaker; not a handsome face, but one to inspire trust and confidence. If there was little of softness, there was much of strength, while the kindly gray eyes redeemed it from sternness.

"You are very kind; but I ought to go home if I can," he said, hesitatingly. "Mother will be anxious about me."

"Send her word where you be, and what's happened. Cousin Seth, you'll be willing to call and tell her."

"Certain," was the reply. "That'll be the best way; and I'll go right along and let the folks know."

Half an hour after Miss Armstrong inquired for the health of her guest, and received the welcome reply, "I am very much better, thank you. That last dose was wonderful in its bitterness and its effects."

"I know 'twas bitter," said Dorcas, with a smile, which made her almost handsome. "But we have to take a good many bitter doses in our lives, and there an't no use making a fuss over them. You done pretty well with yours this time."

"I hadn't much choice in the matter," replied Brent, laughing. "I shouldn't think of disputing your authority."

"You an't like that much of the time, if I read your face right. You an't always ready to give up to other folks, and let them manage for you."

"No, I'm not, that's a fact," said the occupant of the lounge, laughing faintly. "I want to have my own way."

"So do I; but it an't my way to abuse any living thing."

Brent Murray blushed; and feeling obliged to make some excuse for his conduct, replied, "I was out of sorts this morning."

"In plain English, that means that you was cross," rejoined his companion. "There's a good many folks, when they feel ugly, vent

their spite on some creature that can't pay them back. I tell you I wouldn't trust a man, nor a woman either, that abuses a horse."

Dorcas had relieved her mind. She wished to say just this, and she had said it. Cruelty to animals, old people, and children, was, in her estimation, an unpardonable sin, which she would not allow to go unrebuked.

"I don't know but you're right, Miss Armstrong. I'm sorry I made such a spectacle of myself, and I'm sorry I have made so much trouble for you."

"I han't had any trouble to speak of," was the reply. "But it's lucky you was near some house, and 'twas lucky cousin Seth came along."

"How far does he live from here?" asked Brent.

"About a quarter of a mile. He's a pretty near neighbor now, and he's about the best man in the world anywhere."

"I should know that by his looks; and I've heard father say there are few who would do as he has done. It was too bad for him to be

obliged to sell his old home. I wouldn't have done it if there had been any way to prevent it."

"A good many were of your mind," answered Dorcas, as she closed the door; and directly after, in reply to a question asked by Hiram, she said, "He's doing well. He's got so his tongue runs faster than it will to-morrow," and, indeed, Brent was thinking much the same when he fell asleep.

His father's arrival roused him; and after a few attempts at walking, it was decided that he was able to go home. Mr. Murray expressed his gratitude to all for their kindness, bestowing upon Henry a liberal reward, which the boy assured him would be spent for a book. He drove away, leading the saddled horse.

"How did this happen?" he asked his son. "I thought Archer was well broken."

"So he is," was the quick reply. "It was my own fault, and I'm certain it won't happen again. Miss Armstrong said I deserved to be thrown, and I presume she told the truth."

"You were irritated when you left home."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, the next time you are in that mood, don't be such a coward as to abuse one who can't retaliate. That is the most depicable cowardice of which a man can be guilty. You are proud of your manliness, Brent. How was it about manliness to-day?"

First, an angry flash of the eye, and then the boy's better nature triumphed, as he said, "I'm ashamed of myself. I've done a good many things, last year, that I ought not to have done, and I am sorry for it."

"That pays for all, Brent," responded the father, earnestly. "God bless you, my boy, for saying that! It's the most manly act of your life. We'll let the last year go for what it is worth. You fell into good hands to-day."

"Yes, sir; but Miss Armstrong is the strangest woman. Her voice is pleasant; but she could command a regiment of soldiers, and not one dare to disobey."

"She has a kind heart," added Mr. Murray. "We must invite her to come and make us

a visit. I have heard that she would never enter the house after her cousin left it; but I hope we can persuade her to change her mind."

Not another word was spoken in regard to the unfortunate accident, and when they reached home Brent was shielded from the annoyance of many questions. It was observed, however, that for several days, while he was unable to ride, he petted his horse more than usual, thus making amends for his previous ill humor. Truth to tell, Dorcas Armstrong's reproofs were not forgotten. They influenced him in various ways, as she had not thought or expected.

"I say, Jen, I'm going to hear Mr. Stearns preach next Sunday," he said to his sister, when they were the only occupants of the west room. What if father don't go! I'm not going to stay at home here, when there's a chance of seeing somebody in the old meeting-house. If I'm to recite to Mr. Stearns, it won't hurt me to hear him preach."

"Father won't like to have you go," replied

Jennie. "I know he won't, though he don't talk about it. I asked mother."

"Well, I shan't ask anybody," was Brent's response. "We go to church when we're at school, unless we can manage to get excused. It's a bore to go when we can do anything else; but here, father won't have a horse out, or a game played, and we'd better go than stay at home. Don't you want to go?"

"Of course I do. What's the use of my new dresses if I can't go somewhere to wear them? But I'll let you go first."

"Well, we'll see," said Brent; and see they did.

The next Sabbath he was at the church door just as Mr. Merrill was entering. He was invited to a seat, which he accepted. Curiosity forced him to give respectful attention to the services, which he found neither tedious nor stupid. Not that he listened reverently. As yet reverence formed no part of his character; but anything was better than a quiet day at home.

"Father inquired for you," said Jennie, in reply to his favorable report.

"What did he say when you told him where I was?" asked Brent, eagerly.

"Nothing. He only looked at mother, to see if she knew anything about it; and of course she didn't."

"Of course not. I didn't tell her; but I'm going right along every Sunday, same as other people, and the best thing you can do is to go with me."

As Mr. Murray had made no comments when told that his son was in church, so, afterward, he said nothing in regard to it, although he was somewhat troubled. In the city, where he formerly resided, there were many intelligent, cultivated people, who sympathized with him, and with whom he could discuss his transcendental theories. But here he was quite alone in his belief. His wife did not openly dissent from him, yet he knew that her heart craved a different faith. She would not have advised her son to attend church; but she was glad that he had done so. She knew that he needed some restraining influence, more constant and abiding

than any which had yet been brought to bear upon him, and she believed that religion would afford this influence.

It would be too much to say that Brent Murray was moved to the performance of hitherto neglected duties ; but an appeal had been made to his manliness, which he could not wholly ignore. Under pretense of making some further acknowledgment of Miss Armstrong's kindness, he rode in the direction of her house. A little perplexed with the problems forcing themselves upon him, he was yet in good humor with the world and with his horse, when he dismounted in somewhat better style than on his previous visit.

Mággie Wyman met him at the door, and, in answer to his question, told him that aunt Dorcas had gone to grandpa Merrill's. "She'll be home pretty soon, though," was added. "Won't you please walk in?"

"No, I thank you. I think I'll ride on," he answered. "Perhaps I shall call at grandpa Merrill's."

"They'll like to see you. They always like

to see everybody," she made reply, and watched him as he rode away, wondering if he would call at grandpa Merrill's.

A sudden fancy to explore the neighborhood led him past ; and riding slowly, he contrasted the present home of Mr. Merrill with that which they had formerly occupied. Thinking of the sacrifice they had made, he said aloud, "It's too bad. I wouldn't have done it for anybody."

An old man, who had been hidden by an abrupt turn in the road, asked, respectfully, "Did you speak to me, sir?"

"I didn't know that I spoke at all," was the reply. "I must have been thinking aloud."

"That's what I do sometimes ; but young folks an't apt to," said the old man. "That's a hansum horse you're ridin'."

"Yes, sir, I think it is," answered Brent, who had stopped at the first word spoken by his wayside companion.

"Tan't so hansum, though, as Black Jim, that Dorcas Armstrong raised," said the man. "Ever seen that creetur?"

"No, sir; but I should like to."

"Well, she'll let you look at it, and that's all. She broke that colt, and there don't nobody drive it but her. She wouldn't sell it for no money, and she's able to keep it. Maybe you're the youngster that got throwed off your horse a fortnit or so ago. I hearn tell of it."

"Yes, sir, I am the very fellow," was Brent's reply. "I hate to own it. I was thrown, for the first time, and I don't feel very proud of the performance."

"Tan't likely you would;" and here the speaker placed both hands upon his cane, and taking a critical survey of horse and rider, said, "Your name's Murray, an't it? And your father's him that bought Father Merrill's place."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I thought likely. 'Twas a bad job for the old folks to have to move; but 'twas a good thing for us out this way. Be you 'quainted with Father Merrill?"

"No, sir, I am not. I have seen him only two or three times."

"Well, he and his wife's the best folks we've got. They have a meetin' to their house every Tuesday night, and it's goin' to do a heap of good. But I'm hinderin' you. Good day, sir."

It was old Veezy Butterworth again going his rounds, to talk of the "meetin'," and tell of the good things mother Merrill had sent to his wife, that "chirked her up," so that she could go to meeting with him. To this poor woman it had been like a fairy scene. Such singing, such prayers, and such comforting assurances of God's love she had never before heard.

Father Merrill did not tell these people that they were vile, wretched sinners, condemned to death. For him there was a more excellent way, although he firmly believed that only through Christ could man escape eternal condemnation. It was not this doctrine which he most affirmed. Presuming upon the general integrity of those whom he would influence, he appealed to their best feelings, and thus often moved some stubborn heart, which

would have been steeled against the severest denunciations. His praise was upon the lips of all in this remote district; and already there were those who said God had sent him to them.



CHAPTER IX.

MAKING NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

MRS. MERRILL was standing in the door for some last words with her cousin when Brent Murray was about to pass the house for the second time. Reining in his horse, he bowed politely, saying, "I called at your house, Miss Armstrong. I wished to thank you again for taking care of me after my deserved punishment."

"I don't want no thanks; but if I'd been at home, I'd asked you to come in," was her reply. Cousin Mary, this is Mr. Murray's son," she added.

"Good day. I'm glad to see you," said the old lady, in kindly greeting. "I should be glad to have you come in, and I want to know how your mother's health is."

"Thank you. She is as well as usual. I've already been out longer than I intended. I've been to the end of the road."

"Then you've seen some rough land," responded Dorcas Armstrong. "I don't ever go that way unless I'm obliged to. There's a miserable set scattered all along. They're shiftless, lazy, and poor. But there! cousin Mary, we're keeping you standing, and I ought to be at home. Good by."

Brent Murray, too, said "good by," after being invited to come out with his sister and make a visit. Then he accompanied Miss Armstrong on her way home.

"You've used your horse better than you did the other day," she said, abruptly.

"Yes, ma'am; I hope so," was the reply. I'm ashamed of that day, and I thank you for reproving me. Perhaps that fall was the best thing ever happened to me. I met an old man, who told me you had a handsome horse."

"Black Jim is called handsome," replied his owner. "You can judge for yourself, if you're a mind to stop."

How small are some of the links in the great chain of events! How insignificant they seem, and yet how strong they are! How one trivial act may necessitate another, and one careless word awaken thoughts which never more shall slumber! Are there chance encounters in this world? Was it a mere chance that Veezy Butterworth, poor, old, and garrulous, spoke to Brent Murray that glorious autumn day?

The old man thought so, in his simple way congratulating himself that he had talked with Mr. Murray's son. He had one more item of news to relate. He could think aloud without danger of being overheard. "Wonder if he'll stop to look at Black Jim. Wonder what Dorcas'll say to him. Wish he'd come to the meetins."

Anything which promised change or variety was eagerly welcomed by Brent Murray, and he was glad to see Black Jim, whom he could not sufficiently praise. His admiration for this beautiful animal quite conquered the owner's prejudice, and thus was welded another link in

the chain. Before leaving, he learned the name of the old man with whom he had talked, and inquired what meeting was held at Mr. Merrill's every Tuesday evening.

"They call it a prayer meeting," answered Miss Armstrong. "I don't go; but pretty much all the rest of the neighbors do. The young folks have a special invitation, and I'm glad there's somewhere for them to go."

This ride was more fully reported than the previous one had been. Brent was enthusiastic in his description of the people and the houses he had seen. Then the meeting,—"a prayer meeting,"—and at Father Merrill's, too, the place of all others Jennie wished to visit. Could she go?

"I promised to drive out there with you some day, and I will," said her brother. "As for the meeting, I don't know."

"Brent, mother asked me for my Bible to-day," exclaimed Jennie, forgetting all else, as she recalled this strange occurrence.

"What did she want of it?" was asked in reply.

"I suppose she wanted it to read; but she didn't say so. She asked me for it just after father went away. Have you seen her since you came back?"

"No, I haven't," was the reply to this question. "I always tire her, and I don't know just what to say."

"Well, now, put on your slippers, and we'll spend the evening with mother. Why, Brent, you can't begin to think how much she loves you. Losing Harry was what made her sick, and you ought to try and fill his place. Do you remember Elspeth Bawn, the old Scotch woman, who took care of you when you were sick the fall before Harry died?"

"Yes, I do, though I haven't thought of her before for a long time. She was very odd; but she was a good soul. I should really like to see her. What made you think of her?"

"Mother talked about her to-day, and told me how Harry loved her. She wants to see her."

Brent whistled softly, exchanged his boots

for slippers, and followed Jennie into his mother's room.

"You look like Harry," said Mrs. Murray to her son, as he knelt by the couch on which she rested. "I've been thinking of you and Jennie, and now let us try to have a nice evening together. I wish I was stronger, so that I could do something for you; but now I can only love you more than I can tell, or you imagine."

Was there a new light in Brent Murray's eyes, or did his mother look through crystal lenses? Was his voice modulated to tenderness, or did she hear with a quickened sense? She wished to know all that interested her children, and in return was able to tell them something of the people with whom their lot was cast. She repeated the story of the forced sale of the home they now occupied.

"Do you believe father would have given up this place as Mr. Merrill did?" asked Brent earnestly.

"I don't know," was the reply. "Your father is an honest man."

"Yes, mother; but there's a difference in honest men. Father isn't like Mr. Merrill. People call Mr. Merrill a 'Christian,' whatever that may mean. I've a great mind to go over to his meeting some evening. Can't Jennie go with me?"

"Perhaps Jennie don't care to go," answered Mrs. Murray, evasively.

"Yes, I do, mother," said Jennie. "I should like to go almost anywhere. It's dreadfully stupid here, and I wish you'd get well, so that we can go back to the city."

At this the mother moved restlessly, arranging her pillows, and in so doing, a handsomely bound Bible fell to the floor, thus betraying the fact that she had kept it near her. "Lay it on the table," she said, with some embarrassment.

"Let me read to you, mother," said Brent, pitying her confusion. "I'll read anything you please, story, poetry, or the Bible."

"Then read from the Bible," she replied, in a relieved tone. "It is the best book in the world."

This evening was so pleasant, that the next was spent in much the same manner; and, strange as it may seem, Brent and Jennie Murray were interested in the Scripture readings. The boy's sympathy was more strongly enlisted for his mother, and they came nearer to each other than at any time for five long, weary years. Mr. Murray was away four days, and it was wonderful how much his family enjoyed in his absence.

At the end of this time the Bible was banished to Jennie's chamber, and a new atmosphere seemed to pervade the house. With all this there was a sense of injustice, which caused the children to greet their father less cordially. Brent, always outspoken, complained to his sister, declaring that he would read the Bible and go to meeting as much as he pleased. "And I'm going to-morrow, all day," he said in conclusion. "Here I am, sixteen years old, and I guess it's about time for me to know some things myself. I advise you to put on your hat and cloak to-morrow morning, and go with me."

The next morning Mr. Murray engaged his children in conversation, so that they could not leave him without actual rudeness; and when the church bell rang he had just brought forward a new book for their inspection. Nevertheless, Brent rose, saying, "It is time for me to go to church."

"Is it best for you to go?" asked his father, in a voice not quite steady.

"I think it is," was the young man's reply. "I asked Jennie to go with me, but it is too late now for her to get ready."

"It will be time for my children to attend church when I go myself," said Mr. Murray. "I should prefer that you remain at home, my son."

"But I *wish* to go," answered Brent, with flashing eyes. "I must do *something*, and the best people in the world attend church. I learned that at school. Mr. Stearns won't be very likely to teach me anything wrong."

"He might teach you to show more respect for your superiors," remarked the father, calmly; and remembering to what dangers his son

was exposed, he added, "I will allow you to do as you please; but I am sure Jennie will prefer to remain with her mother."

Brent had the grace to say, "Thank you," as he left the room, and directly after he was walking toward the village church in no enviable frame of mind. Again Father Merrill, who had been looking for his appearance, provided him with a seat; and he took his place among the worshiping congregation.

To his astonishment, Mr. Stearns preached upon the tendency of the age to cast off all restraint; and in the progress of the sermon, he took occasion to speak of the disrespectful manners of young people to their superiors in age and wisdom. From this it was easy to make the transition which brought him to the crowning doctrine, reverence for God; and here he lingered longest, enforcing it by argument and illustration.

One listener felt himself personally addressed; and, conscious as he was that he had overstepped the bounds of propriety in the discussion with his father, he acknowledged the deserved rebuke.

"Mr. Stearns *did* teach me to show more respect for my superiors," he said, soon after reaching home. "That was the sum and substance of his sermon, and I hope I shall profit by it."

"I hope you will," was Mr. Murray's reply. "Mr. Stearns is a superior man, and a good neighbor. As such I respect him."

Tuesday evening came, — a rare moonlight evening, — the air, clear and bracing, with just a reminder of winter. Now, in his old home, or at school, Brent Murray could not have been induced to enter a prayer meeting; but here everything was different. He must do something; and, as for ridicule, he thought himself quite above the criticism of country people. So he told Jennie that he was going to Mr. Merrill's, "whether or no."

He also told his father that he was going there, and as no questions were asked, it was not necessary to say for what purpose. For the third time Archer carried him over the lonely road, until he reached the place of meeting. Doors and windows were closed. He

cared for his horse, and then rapped lightly, when Henry Wyman opened the door, and showed him to a seat in the hall, which led to the large, old-fashioned keeping-room.

A few stared at him curiously ; but soon all joined in singing "Coronation," forgetting alike stranger and friend. He listened : how could he do otherwise ? There were some voices feeble with age, some hoarse and husky, yet the grand old melody lost nothing by these defects.

No sooner had it ceased, than old Mr. Butterworth rose to his feet, and said, —

"I han't been to no meetin', 'cept a funeral, for more'n twenty year, till I come here ; and I want to tell you, neighbors, that I'm glad I come. It's somethin' for us poor creeturs to know that the great God thinks about us. But, neighbors, I've just found out that I'm a sinner. That makes me feel bad. But Father Merrill says the Saviour died, so my sins can be forgiven, just as much as though there wan't another poor creetur in the world. Must be I've hearn tell of that afore ; but I'd

forgot all about it. Now I'm tryin' to git hold on't, so I can hold on as long as I live. I han't yit, neighbors ; but I'm prayin' for't, and I want you to pray too."

This homely speech, so far from provoking a smile, moved many to tears ; and before its influence was lost, Father Merrill offered prayer. A hymn was sung, followed by some words of Christian exhortation ; after which two others expressed a desire to know more of the Bible and religion. There was more singing, more praying, more talking, and still Brent Murray occupied his retired corner. But no sooner was the doxology sung, as the closing exercise, than he went out quietly ; and before another had left the house he was riding away at a rapid pace.

At home he made some excuse for not answering his sister's questions that night ; and the next morning he told her she must see and hear for herself, as he never could describe "the affair."

"Well, did you like it ?" she asked. "You can tell that."

"I don't know," he replied. "I mean to go again, and find out if I can. I didn't speak to any one except Miss Armstrong's boy."

Everybody said it was the strangest thing he should come out to that meeting; and those who had not seen him were inclined to doubt the fact. But Henry Wyman assured grandpa Merrill that it really was "the same one aunt Dorcas took care of."

Mr. Murray made no comments; yet it was easy to see that he was disquieted. He manifested even more interest than usual in everything pertaining to the happiness of his family, planning amusements for his children, and providing them with an unlimited amount of reading. Of course they could go to Mr. Merrill's. Both he and his wife wished to establish an intimacy with the good people whose praise was upon every tongue. A basket of winter pears furnished an excuse for a call, which might be prolonged to a visit. Early in the afternoon they started, Jennie being in most buoyant spirits.

"Why, Brent, how stupid you are!" she ex-

claimed, at length. "You look a great deal more sober than the minister, and you don't half talk."

"Are you sure that I *am* Brent Murray?" he asked, in reply, forcing himself to smile. "I have some doubts on the subject."

"What makes you talk so?" now asked his sister, a little impatiently. "I don't know what to make of you."

"You are no worse off than I am. I don't know what to make of myself. If father would send me back to school, I guess I could find the Brent Murray I used to know. Perhaps, though, he escaped to the woods when Archer threw him to the ground. Any way, I don't think I've seen him since." This outburst, and the loud whistling of a tune church-goers would have recognized as Coronation, so far relieved his feelings that he was able afterward to devote himself to the entertainment of his sister.

At Mr. Merrill's they received such cordial assurances of welcome that they accepted the invitation to remain to supper. Jennie, who

was charmed with all she saw, was particularly glad to do so. She had not many acquaintances in town of her own age. Those whom she had met were either older than herself or considerable younger, so that she had keenly felt the want of companionship. Here she was delighted to find a dear old grandmother, such as she had never known, but of whom she had dreamed.

Brent was out of doors, professing to be much interested in farming and stock, while, in reality he cared only to hear Mr. Merrill talk.

"It will be a long time before this farm will be in as good condition as the one you left," he remarked.

"Yes," was the reply. "I worked on that twenty-eight years. I haven't as much time as that for this one; but it's done finely this year. I've been greatly prospered, though it doesn't look quite so pleasant to me here as it does where you live."

"That's a grand place. If it was only near the city, I should hope to have it for a home

all my life. I don't see how people live here one year after another."

"You think you couldn't?" said the old man, with a smile.

"I shouldn't be willing to try," answered his young companion. "I want to see things moving faster, and have something to look forward to."

"We have that," was Mr. Merrill's reply. "This time of year we are getting ready for winter; then, when winter comes, we take a little rest, and visit the neighbors. In the spring we make sugar, and lay our plans for summer's work; and after that everything comes right along till the crops are harvested, and we have another year's bounty to be thankful for. A farmer's life's a busy one, and there isn't any reason why it shouldn't be a happy one, though it isn't everybody that's made for it. After all, it isn't *what* we do that makes the man or woman, so much as *how* we do. Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we should do all to the glory of God. That's the secret of a happy life, in city or

country. I don't suppose you mean to be a farmer?"

"No, sir. I hope to study law."

"Well, a lawyer can be a good Christian. One of my boys used to talk about being a lawyer; but he died before he was as old as you are. He was just fifteen the day he died."

"That was brother Harry's age," responded Brent Murray. "I wish he had lived." This last was said involuntarily, the speaker hardly knowing that he had uttered the words.

"If it had been best, he would be living now," said Mr. Merrill. "The issues of life and death are in God's hands, and we have no reason to complain. If it's his pleasure that some die young while others live to be old, we've all something to be thankful for. 'Twas a great trial to mother and me when our children died; but 'twas right. It's likely you expect to live to be an old man."

"I don't know, sir," was the reply. "I have never thought much about it. I suppose most people expect to live to be old."

"A good many act as though they expected

to live here always. They seem to forget there's another world where we're going to spend all eternity. I didn't think much of that when I was your age; but now I'm growing old, I look forward to the better country."

The conversation was here interrupted by a man who came to ask advice in regard to selling some stock, and Mr. Merrill was as ready to give counsel in this matter as he had been to speak of God's goodness.

"You see your way clear through the winter?" he inquired of his neighbor.

"Yes, sir, if I do as you advise," answered the man. "'Twill be hard work, though."

"Don't be afraid of hard work," said Father Merrill, cheerfully. "'Twon't hurt us. That's what straightens out pretty much all the snarls in this world, when God blesses the work; and I hope, Wallace, you mean to ask for God's blessing."

"I do mean to," was the reply. "I ought to have done it before. I've neglected it too long. I'm much obliged to you for your advice, and I'll follow it. If I come out right a

hundred years from now, 'twill be because you helped me. Good day, Father Merrill."

"Good day, Wallace. Come again, when there's anything I can do for you."

Brent Murray had withdrawn a short distance from the speakers, yet he heard the invitation which closed the interview, and looked with new interest at his host. Directly another neighbor came into the yard, and he was sure that more advice was given, and more words of encouragement spoken. He did not hear; but he saw tears coursing down bronzed cheeks, and the clasp of toil-hardened hands. To his eyes, Father Merrill was like a king dispensing favors with right royal grace, albeit in homely guise.

"I'm afraid you won't think I'm very good company," said the old man, turning to his guest. "It's such a pleasant day, there's a good many out, and the neighbors most always stop when they're going by."

"I should think they would," replied Brent, frankly. "You can tell them everything they wish to know."

"I can tell them some things," was the response. "I love to have them come to me. Mother and me have kept our eyes open as we've gone along through the world, and I guess we've remembered mostly what we've seen. Then we've always read the Bible, and there's all kinds of wisdom in that. I find something new every time I open it. We couldn't live without the Bible. I an't much of a scholar; but I try to understand that."

While they were talking, no allusion was made to the prayer meeting or to the Sabbath service. Father Merrill would not give Mr. Murray reason to say that his son had been unduly influenced. It would have been easy to make a personal appeal to the young man; but this was not done, although he was reminded of his duty in a way that was new to him. At the supper table, God's blessing was invoked upon the portion of his bounty prepared for their refreshment.

"Such a beautiful prayer, wasn't it?" said Jennie, when this was mentioned. "I never

heard anybody pray like that before. Wouldn't mother be glad to hear him?"

"I presume she would," answered Brent; adding in the same breath, "It was a queer visit for us to make. Just think of our going to see two old people, and staying with them four or five hours."

"Well, they an't like any other old people I ever saw," responded his sister. "You needn't speak in that way of our visit. I know you had a good time, and I heard you tell Mrs. Merrill that you should come again."

"So I did, and I enjoyed the visit. I certainly *shall* go again."

After saying this, with much emphasis, her brother was so long silent that Jennie asked him if he was asleep; a question he answered quickly, to the effect that he had no thought of sleeping.

Indeed, for hours after he laid his head upon the pillow it was impossible for him to sleep. "Do all to the glory of God." This phrase haunted him until he began to fear it would forever ring in his ears. He grew angry with

himself for being so foolish. He would go on in the old way, and let eternity take care of itself. His father was a more intelligent man than Mr. Merrill, and his father was living only for this world. So he reasoned, thinking, too, of the ridicule he would be sure to encounter from his former companions should he become religious; and, at length, he deliberately resolved to keep himself from all religious influences.

After this he slept; yet the next morning his first thoughts were of the dear old man whose words had so impressed him. He avoided his mother and sister, and before the day closed, told his father that he was ready to commence studying. He did not go to church the next Sabbath, neither did he attend the prayer meeting; and when asked by Jennie the reason of this, answered that he had heard enough of religion for the present.

He found it less difficult to employ his time pleasantly. The young people of the village, being more at leisure, were disposed to make advances toward a more intimate acquaintance

with their new neighbors; and Brent, who understood his position, was soon a favorite. He commenced regular recitations to Mr. Stearns, who found him so diligent a scholar that the office of teacher was a mere sinecure.



CHAPTER X.

FRANK CLIFFORD.

NOW should you like a classmate?" asked the clergyman, when Brent Murray had been reciting to him for about three weeks.

"I should like it very much," was the reply. "Am I to have one?"

"I think so. A young relative of mine wishes to come here for the winter. I don't know about his scholarship; but he wrote me that he could make his recitations with you. So I shall introduce to you a friend and companion, an orphan boy a year older than yourself."

Frank Clifford was the name of this orphan boy, who was to be the fellow-student of Brent Murray, and his coming was eagerly

anticipated. Mrs. Stearns, who had room in her home and heart for every new comer, was moved to especial efforts in his behalf; and the welcome he received quite satisfied his craving heart. Not much of luxury or elegance could they give him; but the dear home love for which he hungered, was meted to him in no stinted measure. For the ten years since his father's death, his mother had been all the world to him, until she, too, went to that upper home, where is neither sorrow nor sighing. Himself, his horse, and his dog were domesticated at the parsonage, and henceforth formed part of the good minister's family.

Sancho, the great Newfoundland dog, at once made favor with the children, delighting them with his good nature, and the evident complacency with which he regarded them.

"Cousin Frank, be your dog going to live here always?" asked a four years old boy, whose chubby arms were about Sancho's neck.

"He will stay as long as I do, if he lives," replied his master. "Good fellow," was added by way of commendation, as the animal looked

up with an expression of affection, almost human.

"Money wouldn't buy old Sancho. Last summer he saved a little girl's life, and her father offered me a hundred dollars for him; but I must be starving before I sell him. I'd share my last crust with him."

"You'll let us play with him, won't you?" was now asked.

"Certainly, my little cousin; and I've no doubt you'll be great friends. Take care of them. Don't let them get hurt." These admonitions were addressed to the dog, who must have understood them. Looking wistfully from his master to the children, he wagged his tail most emphatically, and said, plainly as eyes may say, "You can trust me for that."

Within a week after his arrival, Frank Clifford commenced regular recitations, and proved himself quite equal, in scholarship, to his companion, who regarded him curiously. Not very robust, he was yet active, energetic, and earnest. Earnestness was the marked

trait of his character, apparent in all which he said or did. One read it in his handsome face, in his wondrously expressive eyes, and in his well closed lips. Life to him was real; as real in its grand endeavors as in the bright dreams inspired by sunshine and song.

His mother had trained him wisely. She had lived *for* him, and *in* him, repressing whatever tended to evil, and fostering every good impulse. She was a Christian; his father was a Christian; and his earliest recollections were of their religious teachings. It was not strange then, that at the age of fourteen he should have taken upon himself the vows which bound him to a life of purity, of holiness. And he did this intelligently. His associates had been carefully chosen; yet he was not ignorant of the temptations which might test the strength of his principles. Allowed to choose his own home, his guardian felt relieved of all responsibility in regard to his future well being when Mr. and Mrs. Stearns signified their willingness to receive him into their family.

As I have before said, Brent Murray regarded him curiously. There was an indefinable something about him which puzzled his young companion. After lessons they sometimes talked of books and sports, Frank Clifford showing himself well versed in both, although he had few exploits to relate.

"You ride horseback?" said Brent, one day when they were left alone.

"Yes, I do," was the reply. "Don and Sancho and I could hardly exist without our gallops."

"Don and Sancho!" Queer names for horse and dog; but they were worthy of their names, and worthy of the petting bestowed upon them.

Brent was much at Mr. Stearns's, and he had enjoyed several rides with his new friend before it was necessary for either to speak of those things wherein they failed to sympathize. An oath, uttered thoughtlessly by Brent, was the occasion of a reproof from his companion; to which he answered, "I beg your pardon. I don't believe in the vulgar habit of swearing

to help out a stupid sentence any more than you do."

"It is the *sinfulness* of the habit which troubles me more than its vulgarity," was the reply. "You have committed a sin against God, for which you ought to ask his forgiveness."

"It is a very common sin," said Brent Murray, with affected carelessness. "I know very few men who never use a profane word."

"Then you must know very few Christians."

"I don't know many," was the response to this conclusion. "There are Mr. Stearns, and Father Merrill, and a few others living around here. But there is my father. He don't fancy religion, but he wouldn't swear any more than the minister. Say, Clifford, what do you think of religion, anyway?"

"Think! I think its the salvation of the world. The religion of Christ is a crown of glory to all who receive it."

"You are an enthusiast, Clifford."

"That may be; and if so, religion is the

theme, of all others, which should call forth my enthusiasm. Why, I have heard its praise all my life, and seen its triumphs over death."

"You're a strange fellow, Clifford. I wouldn't have believed it of you, though I knew there was something about you different from other fellows. Are you a—"

Here Brent paused; but his companion, divining his thoughts, said quickly, "Did you wish to ask me if I am a Christian?"

"Yes, I did wish to ask just that, although, perhaps, it is not a proper question."

"It is quite proper. I profess to be a Christian; and if I know my own heart, I try to live in accordance with Christ's example and precepts."

There was no flush of shame or confusion upon the handsome face as this avowal was made. Ah, no! Frank Clifford was not ashamed to acknowledge his allegiance to God. His companion looked at him earnestly; and remembering his words, almost fancied that a crown of glory encircled his head.

"What do *you* think of religion?" asked he who had last spoken.

"I hardly know," was the reply. "To tell the truth, I don't know much about it. My father don't believe in it, and if my mother does, she is careful to conceal her belief. Not one of us attends church; only I went two Sabbaths, because I was determined I would; and I went to a prayer meeting at Father Merrill's."

"Yes, I heard cousin Stearns say there was a prayer meeting at Mr. Merrill's every Tuesday evening, and I'm intending to go to-morrow."

"I don't doubt but you'll enjoy it; and if I thought as you do, I would go with you," said Brent Murray, heartily; adding, "Didn't Mr. Stearns tell you we were a wicked set at our house, infidels, or something of that sort?"

"No; he said nothing of the kind," was Frank's reply to this strange question. "He told me you were kind, intelligent people, to whom he was indebted for many favors. He didn't say whether you did or did not attend

his church; but he told me of the old man who used to live where you do, and who was obliged to sell the place to meet the obligations incurred for a friend."

"Yes, sir, and that man is the one everybody calls 'Father Merrill.' He is like a king, and his wife like a queen. I suppose you have heard all about that affair, and know that he might have kept the place if he hadn't been so conscientious."

"Yes, I do, and he looks like a man who would do right, though the skies should fall. I don't wonder everybody calls him 'Father Merrill.' I shall ask him to consider me one of his younger sons."

"He will. His heart is large enough to take in the whole town; and there isn't a man, woman, or child but feels honored by his notice."

Brent Murray could think of no higher praise to bestow upon the good old man, whom he admired, and almost revered. After this he talked with his companion upon various subjects; but, much to his surprise, no

further allusion was made to religion. The next day they met as usual, yet he received no invitation to attend the prayer meeting. In the evening he heard Don's ringing hoofs, as horse and rider passed over the frozen road.

"Clifford has started for Father Merrill's," said Brent to his sister.

"To the prayer meeting?" she asked, in response.

"Yes, he is a Christian," was the reply.

"How do you know that, Brent?"

"Because I asked him, and he told me, as though it was something to be proud of."

"Did he try to make a convert of you to his faith?" inquired Mr. Murray, looking up from the paper he held in his hand.

"No, sir, he did not," was the reply. "He answered my questions, and after asking me what I thought of religion, dropped the subject. I don't think I should mind being a Christian myself, if I could be like him. He is a splendid fellow; and he never looked grander than when he said, 'I profess to be a Christian.' I suspect he has plenty of money,

by the looks of some things, though he never said anything about it."

"I hope I shall be able to see him the next time he calls," said Mrs. Murray.

"I hope you will," answered Brent. "He just worshiped his mother, and she has been dead only a year."

"That must be what makes him look so sad," remarked Jennie. "When he isn't talking he looks as though the tears were just coming into his eyes. I'm glad he can live at Mr. Stearns's. They are such dear, good people anybody could feel at home with them."

"And Mr. Stearns is such a fine scholar," added her brother. "That is a great deal for Clifford. He loves books better than I do, and he will give me a try before we get through the winter. He's a queer fellow, though I shouldn't wonder if he could talk and pray like a minister. I'd go over to Father Merrill's, just to hear him. Wouldn't you, Jen?"

"I should like to," she answered.

"Well, there's nothing to hinder. If it's pleasant next Tuesday evening I'll drive over and take you along."

The mother looked anxiously at her children, hoping, praying, it may be, that in some way might come to them the influences she so much desired. Mr. Murray, reading her face as an open book, saw this, and was seriously annoyed. Had they been alone he would have given expression to his feelings ; as it was, he only grew cold and dignified, chilling the hearts of those he loved, and restraining further interchange of thought. They sat through the evening almost in silence, until Don's rapid tread again gave notice that Frank Clifford was abroad.

Then Brent spoke quickly. "I wish I had gone with Clifford. Next Tuesday we'll be sure to go, Jen, so don't make any other engagement for the evening."

As the horseman passed Mr. Murray's house, he was thinking, "I wish all the young people in town had been with me ;" and after reaching home he expressed this wish to Mr. Stearns.

"Then you must have had a good meeting," replied the clergyman.

"Yes, sir," was the hearty response ; "I en-

joyed it, and I think every one present was interested. I shall make it a point to go every week."

"And I hope you will do your part toward sustaining the meeting," said Mr. Stearns. "I don't think it best to attend myself just yet. It is Father Merrill's meeting, and there are a great many people who will hear him talk and pray, who wouldn't listen to a word from me. If I'm not mistaken, there's the beginning of a great work over there. I keep myself informed as to its progress, and when the time comes for me, I shall be ready to do what I can. You saw a motley company."

"Yes, sir ; but they were eager listeners. I tried to say a little to the young people, and I saw two or three weeping. After the meeting was closed they crowded around Mr. and Mrs. Merrill, so that I hurried away as soon as possible."

He was wise in so doing ; for, although these poor people were moved to tears by his appeals, they were somewhat embarrassed by his presence. Old Mr. Butterworth, however,

quite forgot the stranger, when he told, in broken words, what the Lord had done for him, "a poor creetur, who didn't deserve nothin' but punishment clean through eternity."

"'Pears to me I'm all made over new," said the old man. "There don't nothin' seem as 't used to. I can't tell you nothin' how it does seem; only I'm jest brimful and runnin' over with happiness. I don't think much about old Veezy Butterworth neither. I'm thinkin' about Christ and his love most the time when I'm awake. Why, neighbors, he died for all of ye, poor creeturs as ye be."

Blessed truth, never too often repeated, and never too implicitly trusted! If only one soul had been enabled to grasp the glorious fullness of its meaning, then had not Father Merrill labored in vain. He acknowledged this, thanking God for all the way in which he had been led, even to this very place.

"I don't doubt but Veezy 's a Christian," he remarked. "He an't one to put his light under a bushel, neither. He'll have news to tell worth hearing now; and there may be some-

body in this town he has a special message for."

"We'll hope so," answered Mrs. Merrill, earnestly. "He's been to the next house a good deal lately; and Hiram told Betsy he talked about the meetings pretty much all the time he's there. Dorcas wouldn't hear it from many folks; but then she wouldn't really want to tell that old man to stop talking."

"No, mother, she wouldn't; and then I do believe Dorcas has got a conscience about such things. She don't want to hinder other folks from being Christians. She says she wants folks to think for themselves, and she wouldn't pull Veezy back. She'll let him talk when she wouldn't hear a word from me; and she an't so much to blame neither."

Dorcas Armstrong had always assured herself that she was not at all to blame for her opinions, or for ignoring the ordinances of religion. But now she was half inclined to question the truth of this assurance, and consequently was more guarded in the expression of her feelings, lest she might influence

those about her, and thus incur the responsibility of their conduct.

At this time old Veezy Butterworth was a sore trial to her. She expected him every Wednesday, and you may be sure he did not fail to make his appearance when he had such wonderful news to relate. It was past noon when he arrived, later than usual, yet his greeting was the same.

"Good day, Dorcas. What's the good word?"

"I've sold my oats, and got the money for them," she answered.

"Well, that's good, Dorcas; but 'tan't nothin' to what's happened to me. I bleeve I'm a Christian; and I'm so happy, I want to tell on't to everybody. Dorcas, you're a good woman, and you've been good to me and mother; but I'm afraid you han't got religion, have ye?"

"No, Mr. Butterworth, I don't suppose I have, and what's more, I don't want it," she replied, sharply. "I've got along well enough without it, and I guess I shall."

"But, Dorcas, an't ye layin' up all yer things for this world?" asked the old man, nothing daunted. "The Bible says—"

"For goodness' sake, don't quote the Bible to me!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad to have you take comfort your own way, and I'm willing to help you along, but I don't want you to talk religion to me."

"But how can I help it, when it's most all I think on?" asked her visitor, in a bewildered way. "It keeps runnin' in my mind all the time. I got up afore day this morning, and went to work, so I could git time to come over and let ye know what's happened to me; and now ye won't hear me!"

Here tears streamed down the old man's cheeks, and covering his face with his hands, he wept aloud. He was bitterly disappointed. Dorcas Armstrong had always befriended him, a kind-hearted, easy-tempered man, who was more ready to assist a neighbor than to cultivate his land, and who was never quite able to meet the expenses of his family without aid from others.

His admiration for this energetic woman, who had won the praise of being as good a farmer as there was in town, was unbounded. Now, his heart all aglow with the new love and light which had come to him, he wished to tell her of his strange happiness, and implore her to seek the Saviour, who had been so graciously revealed to him.

He knew that she gave no heed to the stated ordinances of religion, but, in his simplicity, he had utterly failed to comprehend her deep-seated prejudice. He had thought her indifferent and careless, never dreaming that she was more and worse than this. Even now he could not understand her. He only knew that she would be offended if he talked of religion, and wiping away the blinding tears, he rose to leave. "Good day, Dorcas," he sobbed. "I'm goin' home to pray for ye."

"Going so soon!" she responded, making a great effort to speak naturally. "No, indeed. Sit down, and let's have a neighborly chat. I'm glad if you're happy, and I don't doubt but what religion is a good thing for most folks. But, you see, I don't want it."

This was the second time she had made the assertion that she did not want religion; but even as she repeated the words, a great fear fell upon her. Her visitor was glad of an excuse for resuming his seat, and a little after he accepted a small parcel of tea with his usual thanks; but it was impossible to engage him in conversation.

"I can't talk about only one thing," he said, in answer to some question. "I'd better be goin'; and, Dorcas, I hope you'll go to the meetins. 'Tan't right to condemn a thing afore you know somethin' about it; and I'm afraid you're makin' a mistake about religion. Good day."



CHAPTER XI.

A WANDERER RESCUED.

THE first snow storm of the season. Not a gentle shower of feathery flakes falling softly upon brown grass and sear, dry leaves. Not the slow, steady heaping of rare crystals upon ever-green twig and moss-grown stone, until they wore a mantle of such dazzling whiteness as mortal can not fashion. Not like this was the first snow storm which visited the quiet country town as autumn lapsed into winter. Roaring through forests and down hillsides swept the fierce north-easter, scattering here and there its burden, only to be swept again by the eddying blast, until it found lodgment in some cranny of the rocks or sheltered nook.

A bitter night, when home comforts were

dearer and home loves sweeter for the pitiless storm without. Old-fashioned people stirred the fire to a brighter blaze, and piled huge logs against the chimney back, drawing closer the shutters, and if so be they were Christians, thanking God for warmth and shelter.

The stage was late by an hour. "The wind was against us," said the driver. "If it hadn't been for the mail, I'd been tempted to stop at the pond."

"Have many passengers?" asked the landlord.

"Two," was the reply. "One stopped at Squire Tolman's, the other got off at the cross roads. I picked him up just before dark down in the woods. Asked him if he wanted to ride, and he said he hadn't any money. Of course I told him he was welcome to a seat on the box, and pulled him up. He looked to me as though he might be hungry, though I couldn't see much of his face, and 'twouldn't do to ask him. I asked him two or three times where he was going, but either he didn't hear me, or didn't want to."

"How did he look? What did he say? Where did he come from?"

All these questions, and many more, were asked in vain. A cap pulled over his forehead, and a shawl muffled about his throat and chin, so concealed his face that one could hardly tell if it were white or black. As for talking, the storm would have prevented much conversation, even had the traveler been disposed to speak of himself.

"He was sitting on a log when I saw him," said the stage driver, in answer to further inquiries. "I took it he was resting and waiting for the stage, so I stopped. He had a valise with him."

"Should you know him if you should see him?"

"Guess I should, if I see him walk. He limped as though one leg was half a foot the shortest. I'm glad I give him a ride, let him be who he will. It's tough work to go afoot through the world. That's the way I started, and I didn't have many helps neither. I used to think 'twould be kingdom come to drive

stage; but it's about as Father Merrill says, 'Tan't so much difference *what* you do as *how* you do.' When that stranger thanked me to-night I felt rich as a king, just because I'd given him a lift. It's something to be able to help other folks."

If the stranger had known how kind a heart beat beneath the shaggy coat of his friend, the driver, he might, at least, have acknowledged that he was starving. He had not eaten a mouthful of cooked food for three days. He had not rested upon a bed for more than a week. Yet he was pressing on, fearing to die, yet fearing more to ask for charity. He was no nearer his destination than he had been when the stage driver literally dragged him to a seat; and it was to avoid the village, which he was told was near, that he had left the stage.

Now, whither? He stood irresolute, then scanning the heavens, with something like superstition, he determined to walk in whatever direction light appeared. For a moment there was a rift in the clouds, and he staggered

forward down the road leading past Dorcas Armstrong's.

In his valise was part of an ear of corn he had reserved for his supper. This he had found by the wayside, and with it had been able to sustain himself through the day.

A barn would give him shelter for the night ; but the barn must be remote from a house, else he might be seen ; and to avoid the sight of every human being was his first desire.

How long he could do this he did not stop to question. For three weeks he had been a wanderer, traveling hundreds of miles, having reached a part of the country of which he had no knowledge, and where he could claim no kinship if he would.

The storm beat upon him, the wind pressed him, the sky was leaden above him, and his heart was nigh to breaking. Was there, in the whole wide world, no resting-place for him ?

He had been such a proud, ambitious boy, such a brave worker among his fellows ! And now was it all over, — the dreams of his very

childhood, and the inspiring hopes of his young manhood ? How the thought tortured him, maddened him, until he was ready to curse himself and die !

"One day more," he murmured. "O God, forgive me and help me !"

Only he was abroad that night. He might have shouted, even shrieked, in his agony without danger of being heard. The cold chilled his very bones ; but despair gave him strength. The spirit of unrest which goaded him was like the fearful cry ever ringing in the ears of him condemned to spend an eternity of punishment in wandering to and fro upon the earth. Lights streamed out into the darkness, and gates stood invitingly open, yet he struggled on.

At length, when his strength was well nigh spent, he fancied that he saw a barn at some distance from the road, and toward this he bent his steps. He was not disappointed. A flock of sheep was here sheltered, and the soft hay offered a tempting couch for his weary frame. He ate of his dry corn, heaped the

hay upon his feet, gathered his shawl about him, and lay down to sleep. God pity him! He was some mother's boy.

Mr. Merrill was dozing by the fire, when his wife said, "Father, if you're going to see to the cattle to-night, it's time you went. I wish, though, you could stay in the house. It's a dreadful night."

"Yes, mother; but the storm won't hurt me."

The good woman lighted the lantern, tied a muffler about her husband's neck, and opened the door for him, charging him not to be gone long. Then she sat down to her knitting, watching the clock to see how time passed. He was gone longer than usual. She went to the window and looked out, went to the door and strained her eyes, in the vain attempt to catch a gleam from his lantern. She was anxious; and after the lapse of a full half hour, prepared to go in search of him.

Meanwhile he had quite forgotten her charge. Having attended to the cattle, something prompted him to look after his sheep,

although he had seen them safely housed before dark. A groan and some muttered words arrested his steps on the threshold of the old barn. He paused to listen, but the mutterings were so incoherent that he could not understand them.

"For God's sake, don't take me to prison!" was the exclamation which greeted him as he raised his lantern to get a better view of the speaker. "I'll go away, and never come back."

"Go away, my friend?" said Mr. Merrill, kindly. "There's no need of your going further than the house. This is too cold a bedroom for such a night."

"Yes, it's cold," replied his companion, with a shiver. "But it's better than a fence or a tree; and I'll be so thankful if you'll let me stay here till morning."

"No, my boy, I can't let you stay here, but you can come to the house, and mother and me'll take care of you. Come, stand up on your feet; you'd die here before morning."

"It wouldn't matter if I did," was the reply.

"Wouldn't it, my friend? Have you com-

mitted your soul to God, and are you sure that he has pardoned your sins?"

"Are you a Christian?" How earnestly was this question asked, and how the questioner struggled to rise from his humble couch, gladly accepting the hand outstretched for his assistance.

"It's most fifty years since I professed to be a Christian," answered Father Merrill.

"Then I can trust you," was the response.

"Certain, you can," said the old man, with a quiver in his voice. "There can't nobody say that Seth Merrill ever betrayed a trust. But we won't stop here to talk. I'll take your valise, and we'll get to the house soon as we can."

He was obliged to assist the stranger, and, with the wind against them, they made slow progress. Mrs. Merrill saw the light, and, wondering whence it came, waited for its approach.

"You shouldn't come out to-night, mother," said her husband, thinking first of her comfort, and then adding, "I've got company with me."

She hastened back to the house, where she presently welcomed the stranger, who could only make an inarticulate reply before he fell to the floor. Hunger, cold, and mental suffering had well nigh done their work; but he was with kind friends, who, stopping not to ask whence he came, or whither he went, bestowed upon him the most careful attention.

"Thank you! God bless you!" he murmured, when he could speak. "I don't deserve it, but my mother does. Oh, mother! mother!"

"Don't, don't, child. Don't think now. Wait till you're better, and then you can tell father and me all your trouble. Perhaps we can help you. We've had boys of our own, but God took them. You needn't be a bit afraid to trust us. Everybody round here comes to us when they're in trouble. If you're very hungry, 'twon't do for you to eat much," said the same thoughtful woman, when her guest was seated at the table. "Drink your tea, and eat that slice of toasted bread. You can have some more when 'twill do. I'm glad you come right here to-night."

A little apart from them sat Father Merrill, studying the face of his guest, young, well educated, and possessing abilities above the average. Thus much he read at a glance. More. If a criminal, not one hardened by long familiarity with vice. Tempted, it might be; and wanting Christian principle, yielding to temptation; but it was no branded outlaw from society who found shelter beneath his roof.

"You must tell me when I have eaten enough," said the young man to his hostess, for the first time turning his eyes full upon her. "I never dreamed of coming to this. It would kill my father and mother to know what I have suffered the last month."

"You've got a good father and mother," Mrs. Merrill made response.

"I have. My father is a good man; but my mother is the best woman in the world, and I am their only son. I've three little sisters, too, good as good can be; and they love me so well they think I am almost perfect. My God! How have I fallen!"

It was so long since he had spoken, save to himself in broken sentences, or in reply to

questions he wished to evade, that now he could not refrain from giving voice to some of the memories and regrets which thronged his mind. A flush of shame crimsoned his face as he uttered the last exclamation, yet he did not seek to hide his confusion.

"Don't child, don't," said the woman by his side. "Take this biscuit and eat it. I guess it won't hurt you." He ate the coveted food greedily, then leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"You'd better lay down on the lounge and take a nap," remarked Father Merrill.

"Thank you," was the reply. "I believe I *am* sleepy; but I ought to tell you who I am."

"No matter about that till you're rested. I'll trust you till then, and there won't be anybody here to-night but mother and me. I don't know who you be, nor what you've done; but I'm going to do by you the same as I should want anybody to do by a boy of mine if he was in your place. So make your mind easy, and take a good rest. After that I'll hear what you've got to say."

With a murmured "Thank you," the stranger removed his worn, soiled boots, and lay down on the lounge occupying a corner of the room which the firelight left in shadow.

Mr. Merrill took the old family Bible, read a chapter full of promises, and then knelt to pray. Oh, how earnestly did he pray for his wife, for himself, and for the stranger in their dwelling!

"Bless us all, as we severally need; forgive our sins, blot out our transgressions, and make us worthy to be thy disciples. Help us to do our whole duty, to make restitution for all wrongs, and rectify all mistakes.

"If we have been overcome by temptation, O Thou who wast tempted like as we are, show pity and forgive. And, O Lord, help us to confess all our sins, that they appear not in judgment against us. Let us not be discouraged, though we fall many times. Thou knowest how weak we are, while thou art high and lifted up.

"We commend ourselves to thy keeping this night, and we bless thee for thy mani-

fold mercies, which are new every morning, and fresh every evening. Hear us, and answer us, as thou seest that we need, for Christ's sake."

The first sentences of this prayer were scarcely heeded by the occupant of the lounge; but to these concluding petitions he listened as for his life. It was what he needed to hear; and the blessings craved were what, of all others, he most needed to receive. He had yielded to temptation, had fallen, and had been discouraged, yet there might be hope for him, through Christ, "For Christ's sake." How often he had heard his father use this expression in the dear old home hundreds of miles away, where the mother who had taken him for her very own, although another had given him birth, made sunshine and gladness. He dreamed of this home, starting from his sleep as he heard the welcoming shouts of his sisters. The clock struck twelve. Without, the wind howled, and moaned, and shrieked, like an accusing spirit. Within, the fire burned low; but there was a grateful sense

of warmth and security which reassured him. His host, comfortably seated in a large arm-chair, had slept while he slept, waking when he gave signs of waking, and now watching for what might follow. The young man was standing, when Mr. Merrill asked, pleasantly, "Have you slept?"

"I guess I have," was the hesitating reply. "But I thought I was at home."

"Well, you can call this home, while you're here. Most any home is better than none such a night as this."

"Most any is better than I deserve. But I don't remember just how I came here. I went into a barn somewhere, didn't I?"

"Yes. But no matter about that now. Don't you want some luncheon? Mother left some on the table, against you should wake up. Then, if you want to go to bed, I'll show you the way. There's some slippers mother hunted up for you."

His comfort had been considered in all things; and, when he was able to think connectedly, the events of the previous evening

were fully realized. He ate what was provided, then took a seat by the fire, shading his eyes with his hand.

"I know I ought not to keep you up," he said, at length. "But it seems to me I shall go crazy if I can't tell somebody my trouble; and you ought to know that you've taken a thief into your house." Here he paused, covering his face, while great sobs convulsed his frame. "Oh, sir, you don't know how dreadful it is," he continued, when he could command his voice. "Why, I never even told a lie before I left home, and I wouldn't have taken a pin that didn't belong to me. It don't seem now as though I really *did* steal, though I *know* I did. I kept back fifty dollars from my employer. I meant to pay it, though, and I should if I hadn't been detected. I didn't mean to be a thief. Oh! I wish I had died. It isn't wicked to wish that, is it? If it is, I've done so many wicked things, one more won't make much difference."

"Yes, my boy, it will make a difference," said the old man, solemnly. "*Every* sin makes

a difference ; and it may be that wish was more wicked in the sight of God than keeping money that didn't belong to you. Tell me how it all happened, and perhaps I can help you. Tell me, just as you would your father. But first tell me your name, and the name of the town where you was brought up."

This done, George Esty proceeded with his story, which was not unlike that of many another who has left a country home to seek his fortune in some busy city. He was not satisfied with the slow, plodding life of a farmer, although no one could complain that he failed of his duty as a farmer's son. He wanted more money, more opportunities for mental improvement, more knowledge of the world, and more tasteful surroundings. And to his credit, let the whole truth be told. He desired these quite as much for his step-mother and her children, as for himself. He read and studied whatever came within his reach, not so much for study's sake as for the advantages knowledge might give him.

His father, whose ambition had been con-

finied within narrow limits, had little sympathy for the boy, who, while working diligently, was always looking forward to something better ; but his mother encouraged him to expect what he so much desired. It was through her influence that he received a better education than that afforded by the common school ; and it was through her good management that he appeared at the Academy as well dressed as his fellow-students. She expected great things of him ; and as a scholar he had not disappointed her.

At the age of twenty he went to the city, with strong purposes and pure motives. Conscientious and truthful, he was yet not a Christian. Herein lay his weakness. He did not love God with all his soul, his mind, and his strength ; and whosoever fails of this, has no claim to be counted a follower of Christ.

The first year he worked hard for small wages, and his company was little sought by those who were his equals in education or ability. The second year he was advanced, with an increase of salary, when some met him

graciously, who had before passed by on the other side. He was invited to join various excursions for pleasure, which invitations, however, he usually declined. Thus he passed two years of his city experience, meeting his expenses, and occasionally sending some token of remembrance to his mother and sisters. He attended church regularly on the Sabbath, spending the leisure hours of that day in reading some useful book.

It was during the last half of the third year that he formed the acquaintance of a young man, older than himself, who won his confidence and admiration to an unusual degree. This new friend was not one who would be called a bad man; on the contrary, he was more exemplary than most of his class; but his habits were far different from those of George Esty. Church-going he counted a nuisance, although he was careful not to express his contempt for the "old institution" before those who revered it. He was too polite and too politic thus to offend.

Something in the manliness and freshness

of George Esty attracted him at first sight. "Reliable," was the word he used when speaking of Esty. "You can just depend on him, through thick and thin; and if he lives, he'll make one of the solid business men of the city. No sham about him."

We will not accuse the speaker of plotting the downfall of one whom he so freely praised. Perhaps he only wished to introduce the young clerk into society. He may have been one of those who contend that young men should know by experience the evil of the world, that they may the better avoid it; that they should look down into the reeking pit of pollution, that they may not be suffocated by its fumes.

George Esty's lips were pure, and his heart true; but he was not above temptation. It came to him in subtle guise. A glass of wine was offered when he was exhausted by over-exertion, and when, if ever, the system naturally craves a stimulant. He drank it thoughtlessly, and, exhilarated by its effects, was more brilliant than his companions had

thought possible he could be. He experienced some ill effects from this indulgence ; but he was growing over-confident of his own strength, and, flattered by others, he did not pause to consider whither he was tending.

His expenditures were largely increased. His seat in church was often empty, and he began to think that his mother was not so wise as his fancy had painted her. In all this he was not really dissipated. Those who advocate the moderate use of wine would have pronounced him *very temperate*. He did not ridicule religion or the Bible. He only said, by way of excuse for his changed habits, that there was a time for all things, and his time for pleasure had come.

Of course this pleasure was mingled with some pains. He incurred debts, which it was difficult for him to pay. He was less inclined to hard work, while racking headaches were his every-day companions. Still he retained the confidence of his employer, who was about to give some tangible proof of this confidence, when, in an evil hour, to silence an impor-

tunate creditor, he retained fifty dollars paid for goods, making no return of the sale.

"I meant to pay it back," said George Esty, when he reached this point in his narrative. "I never kept back a cent before that, and I wouldn't have done it then, if I hadn't been afraid my creditor would report me to Mr. Wallace. I was almost crazed that day with headache and heartache, and I think I've been crazed ever since."

He had spoken rapidly, pausing only for a long-drawn sigh, or to recover breath, while his companion had asked no questions, choosing that what was told should be told freely. Not once did Mr. Merrill doubt the truth of what he heard. Not once did he suspect his guest of being an adventurer.

"I don't know how I can tell the rest ; but I want you to know," continued the stranger. "It was only the next day the customer came in who had paid me fifty dollars, and while talking with Mr. Wallace, spoke of his purchase. Mr. Wallace was a man that knew what was going on in his store every day, and

the goods I sold were something new that he felt anxious about. I was standing where I could see him, and I knew the minute it was mentioned. He watched me all day after that, and all the week. I tried to borrow the money, but I couldn't. I thought I could pretend it was all a mistake if I could only manage to get the money; and when I couldn't do that, I should have gone to Mr. Wallace and told him the whole truth, only I knew he never forgave dishonesty. So I kept on, till one day he called me into the counting-room, and asked me if I had sold any of the new kind of goods. Then I told him all about it, and begged him to forgive me. I went down on my knees to him, and prayed for mercy, until, at last, he told me I was free to go where I pleased. I begged him to give me another trial, though I might have known he wouldn't."

"He ought to done that," said Mr. Merrill, emphatically. "If he'd been a Christian, he would."

"I don't know," replied the young man.

"He professed to be a Christian, and he never deceived his clerks. They knew what to depend upon. He told them, in the beginning, that he shouldn't overlook any dishonesty. I might as well have prayed to a stone as to that man. He has three boys of his own, and I hope they never'll need such mercy as I asked for. He told me I deserved to be brought to justice and punished. O God, how he tortured me!"

The old man, who listened to this recital, bent forward toward the speaker, yet uttered not a word of comment.

"I think Mr. Wallace was sorry for me, if he was so stern. He told me he wouldn't injure me with others. I might get employment where I could, and he wouldn't interfere. But he knew I couldn't get into any respectable store in the city, and I knew I wouldn't go to any other. It was just as we were through work for the day that he called me into the counting-room, and it was dark when I came out. I don't know how I got to my boarding-house; but when I did get there, I told my

landlady I shouldn't see anybody that night, and locked myself into my room. I tried to think what I could do, or where I could go; but it was all dark. I made up my mind to one thing. Mr. Wallace should have the fifty dollars that belonged to him, if I sold everything I had.

"My landlady was a good woman, who had always been kind to me, and I knew she had noticed the change in me; so I told her my trouble, and asked her to help me. She believed me, dear soul, and offered to sell anything for me I wanted sold. She talked to me some as my mother would, and she managed so well for me that I kept my clothes, except what things I'd rather be rid of than not. I had some pictures and some books, and a few pieces of furniture, and these brought enough to pay my board and the fifty dollars. I had to leave some other debts, but Mrs. Hope said I'd better do it. I wrote a note to Mr. Wallace, and she carried it, but he didn't make any reply, only sent me a receipt for the money. I don't suppose he was to blame;

but if he had known how sorry I was, seems to me he would have done differently."

"He ought to," added Mr. Merrill. "He ought to; and it's likely to me he'll live to know it. We must forgive, as we would be forgiven."

"Yes, sir," answered the young man, absently. "I couldn't go home; I wouldn't do that; and I couldn't stay where I was. So I started, with a few dollars in my pocket, and took the first train that was leaving the depot. That was three weeks ago yesterday, and since then I've been wandering round. I rode till my money was almost gone, and then I walked. I don't think my head has been quite right some of the time. I've found myself at night in the same place I started from in the morning, and I've wished myself dead a thousand times. I haven't slept in a house for a week, and for three days I've lived on nuts and apples and dry corn that I've picked up in the fields or roads. But I haven't taken what I hadn't a right to, and I'll starve before I ever do that again. Oh, sir, I know you're a Chris-

tian. I heard you pray for me to-night, and if you'll tell me what to do, I'll do it, if it's ever so hard. I want to do right. God knows I do, if I have done wrong."

"Have you prayed God to help you?" asked the aged Christian.

"No, sir. I'm afraid to ask him," was the reply. "I've no right to expect he would hear me. But I can't live so. I don't know where to go."

"You'll stay just where you are for the present, my boy, so you needn't worry about that. We're poor folks, but we can give you a home for a while, till we can make up our minds what's best. You've sinned. I an't going to say you han't; but there's forgiveness for sin with God, and there's time enough for you to get back your name and do something in the world yet. I must have time to think what's best; but the best thing you can do now is to go to bed and sleep, unless you want a luncheon first. We can have a cup of tea together. I can make tea most as well as mother, and here's some light biscuit that won't hurt you."

"How good you are!" exclaimed George Esty, clasping his thin hands. "I never expected to be treated like this again; but you won't be sorry. You shan't be sorry. I'll work and pay you some way."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when the door of an adjoining room, which had been slightly ajar, was thrown wide open, and Mrs. Merrill appeared.

"Why, mother, you up and dressed!" said her husband, in surprise.

"Yes, father; I've heard that poor boy's story, and I couldn't help coming to tell him how sorry I am for him. There an't no need of your being discouraged," she added, to the young man, who was now standing, respectfully, as she crossed the room to him. "Dear boy, God loves you, if you have done wrong, and you shan't be driven out again, to starve, as long as we've got a shelter." He had striven hard to control himself, but these words of tenderness so moved him that he could make no response. He could only weep, feeling again the pitiless blast, and

standing again beneath a darkening sky. "Don't, child, don't," said his hostess, soothingly, as she smoothed back his tangled hair. "You're safe, and father 'll find a way to help you. He always does. It's my opinion you an't so bad as the man you worked for. 'Tan't for sinners to refuse mercy to each other. I'm glad you come this way."

Was ever this woman other than glad of company? Those who came *with* favors were welcomed; and those who came *for* favors were no less cordially received. When her guest had succeeded in expressing something of his gratitude, and she had replied by assuring him that everybody has a right to kindness in this world, where all are fed from God's bounty, she spread the table with a generous supply of food. "I don't think 'twill do you a bit of hurt to eat all you want now," she said. "It's most three o'clock, and I guess I can eat some myself. Come, father, set right up, and we'll have an early breakfast."

So they ate together as friends. Then one

was shown to a pleasant chamber, where he lay down and slept in peace, while those who had made such sleep possible for him discussed his interests.

"The way'll be made clear," said Father Merrill. "There's a good many wouldn't believe his story; but I an't often deceived. I'd trust him. I watched him close, and he told a straight story. The town where he says he left his trunk an't so far off but what we can find out about that; and if I remember right, Mr. Stearns has got a cousin living in the city where he says he worked. Perhaps 'twill be best to make some inquiries there."

"Yes, father; I knew you'd think of some way to settle it," replied his wife, joyfully. "He can stay here for the present; and while John's gone, he can help you about the chores. We'll have to tell Dorcas about him, I guess, she's so near, and she'll be sure to keep his secret. 'Twont do to have everybody know how he come here."

"You're right, mother. The sooner we tell Dorcas the better, if he concludes to stop with us. We'll see before night."



CHAPTER XII.

MR. MURRAY'S AUTHORITY QUESTIONED.

IT was past noon when the stranger guest awoke. For more than an hour he lay thinking, trying to believe that he had dreamed of crime, until all came back to him with such fearful distinctness that he could not resist the conclusion. What should he do? Where should he go? These questions, which it was impossible for him to answer, constantly recurred to him. He only knew he must do something.

At length his host appeared, bearing a pitcher of water, towels, and a pan of coals, with which to light the wood heaped in the large fireplace. "I thought I heard you stirring," said the old man. "You lie still, now, till I make a fire. Then, when it gets to burn-

ing, you can get up and dress you. Mother sent up a pair of feeting. She thought, maybe, they wouldn't come amiss. I hope you slept well."

"Yes, sir, I did, thank you. But you are too good to me."

"There's none good but One," was the reply. "I've got a plan for you, and when you come down we'll talk it over."

How the long tongues of flame leaped up the wide, open chimney, brightening the room with a strange, weird light! How the grateful heat softened the chilly air, and brought new hope to one who had well nigh despaired!

George Esty made a careful toilet, brushing from his clothes the stains of travel and the accumulated dust. But it was not so easy to banish the marks of suffering from his face. Hollow cheeks and sunken eyes told their story in forcible language. He walked with difficulty, and few would have recognized him as one whose ringing step could not be mistaken. He was reading from the Bible, when

a light tap upon the door of his room interrupted him.

It was Mrs. Merrill's kindly face which greeted him, and her strong, true hand, which clasped his own. "I thought, maybe, you was waiting for an invitation to come down," she said. "So I told father I guessed I'd come up and see how you was. I've got some victuals all ready for you, and father's got something to say to you before he goes about his chores. You'd better do just as he wants you to. He's called to have good judgment; and he's as good as most folks get to be in this world."

"I shall be glad to do as he tells me," was the quick response. "I know he is good; and you've helped me already, more than I expected any body would. But I've been thinking you haven't anything but my word for the truth of my story, and I don't know as I ought to expect you to believe it."

"No matter about that now," replied Mrs. Merrill. "Father'd know if you crossed yourself. 'Tan't much use for anybody to tell him

a lie. Perhaps you ought to know that we've told cousin Dorcas about you. She lives in the next house, and she owns this place we live on. You see she's just like one of our own folks, and she'd see you here, and wonder. So father went over and told her this morning. She can keep a secret fifty years, if anybody wants her to, and she'll keep yours. She's a good woman, and maybe she'll do you a good turn some way."

It was well, perhaps, that a call from the kitchen should interrupt the conversation, and summon hostess and guest to the well-spread table, which received all proper attention, after which some matters of business were decided. Dorcas Armstrong's hired man was going with a team to the town where George Esty had left his trunk, and it could be sent for without any expense. Then, Mr. Merrill's hired man would be kept at home for several days, at least, by the sickness of his father, and the stranger could stay and help about the place, if it suited him to do so.

"I don't see but what you've got to start

new, and work your way up," said the old man. "It's a pity; but it won't be the last step that hurt you so much as the first. When you begun to drink wine, and stay away from meeting, and run in debt, you begun to go down hill. It's likely to me you didn't read the Bible much after that, and you forgot to say the prayer your mother learnt you. That's the way folks go on, no matter whether they're in the city or the country. Now, I don't see no reason to doubt your story; but it's best to be certain, when you can, so I'm going to take some measures to find out."

"I wish you would, sir," was the reply. "Only I should like a chance to do something for myself before people find out that I'm a —"

"Don't say that ugly word," interrupted Mr. Merrill. "You shall have the chance, if you are honest, and I can help you. One thing, though. You said the stage-driver give you a lift last night. Will he be likely to know you again?"

"I think not," answered the young man. "I kept my face muffled up, and I talked so

little that he won't remember my voice. Then, when he saw me walk, I limped as bad as any lame man. I was lame, but I wouldn't have limped as I did. I despised myself for the deception, but I wanted to be sure that he wouldn't recognize me if he saw me again."

"But there's your shawl. Mother says there an't one anywhere round here like it. May be he'll know that. He's a sharp fellow; and 'tan't often he picks up anybody as he did you. 'Twon't be best to let everybody know, just yet, how you come here."

"I should rather they wouldn't know," was the response. "I'll keep the shawl out of sight; I shan't have occasion to wear it while I stay here."

"Maybe not," answered Mr. Merrill. "I'm going to look after the sheep now, and you can make yourself comfortable up stairs or down stairs. You'll need to rest a day or two before you go to work; and then if anybody asks you any questions you an't obliged to tell more than you're a mind to."

George Esty looked with wonder upon one

so simple and straightforward in his goodness, who yet guarded so shrewdly against unpleasant contingencies. The old man seemed to him the impersonation of all wisdom. Taking advantage of the privilege granted him, he returned to his chamber, there to think of the past, and speculate in regard to the future. Presently, however, he heard a strange voice in the room below, and this recalled him to a sense of his unfortunate condition.

Dorcas Armstrong had come over to talk with cousin Mary about "that young man;" and she might well be pardoned if she gave less credence to his story than did those who heard it from his own lips. "It don't look reasonable," she said, with her usual earnestness. "I'd taken him in, if he'd called at our house, but I shouldn't done as much for him as you have. You don't know but he'll prove to be a state's-prison character."

"Now, Dorcas," replied the old lady, deprecatingly, "I an't going to blame you one bit for saying that, though it sounds hard. What did Hiram say about the trunk?"

"He didn't say much. 'Tan't his way. Cousin Seth told him the owner wanted it, and I told him that was enough for him to know about it. So, if there's such a trunk at the tavern, he'll bring it along. For my part, I don't want to be hard on anybody; and I don't doubt there's a good many led away, just as that boy says he was; but it's strange to me he didn't go where he had some friends, instead of straggling round the country."

"Maybe," answered Mrs. Merrill. "But I guess you and I don't know much about it. Any way, that boy's come here, and I hope he'll stay till we know more about him. Father thinks he can find out for certain whether he tells the truth or not."

In pursuance of his intention, Mr. Merrill visited Mr. Stearns the next day, and found that the clergyman had a cousin, who was a wealthy merchant in the city, from which George Esty claimed that he had come. A carefully worded letter was at once dispatched to this merchant. Questions were asked which could not fail to elicit the truth, and

cautions given, which a man of honor would feel bound to regard.

A week must elapse before an answer could be expected, and during this time Mr. Merrill continued to treat the stranger as one worthy of confidence. John did not return ; and as it was no unusual thing for young men to seek work among the farmers, the neighbors made few inquiries, after being told that "he came along, and was willing to turn his hand to most anything." His trunk came, marked and labeled as he had described, and in due time Mr. Stearns rode over, bringing good tidings.

His cousin had written a most satisfactory letter. The merchant knew George Esty, had seen him frequently in the store of Mr. Wallace, and could vouch for his having been a young man of exemplary habits.

"There are some rumors of a change in his habits the last months he was here, and I have been told that he left suddenly. It is quite possible that he yielded to some temptations to evil. I asked Mr. Wallace in regard to this, and, although he was not inclined to answer

my questions, he said he believed Esty to be scrupulously truthful."

After reading to Mr. and Mrs. Merrill the letter, some sentences of which I have transcribed, Mr. Stearns asked to see the young man ; who came in, wearing a farmer's frock, and looking very unlike the forlorn wanderer who had not where to lay his head. It needed but the indorsement of Mr. Clapp, a man universally respected, to substantiate his story.

"You knew Mr. Clapp?" said the clergyman.

"Yes, sir, I knew him as a business man, and I am very much obliged to you for writing to him about me. I can't be thankful enough that I happened to come this way."

"You didn't happen to come ; God sent you," responded Father Merrill, earnestly. "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without his notice, and it's likely to me that you needed something to show you your own weakness. If you'd gone on staying away from meeting, and neglecting the Bible, and still not done anything to disgrace yourself in the eyes of men, you might have lost your soul.

An't that the way a good many do, Mr. Stearns?"

"Yes, sir. There are many who think that all is well so long as their sins are such as society will tolerate. They forget that God, who looks upon the heart, has a standard of his own, by which he tests their characters. There are people who pride themselves upon speaking the truth and acting honestly, who will be covered with shame and confusion in the day of judgment, as they realize how vile they are. It may be, my young friend, that what you regard as the misfortune of your life, will prove its greatest blessing," continued the clergyman, addressing George Esty. "Father Merrill may be right in his conclusion, that you needed something to show you your own weakness."

"I know I did, sir," was the reply. "But that is no excuse for my crime."

"Certainly not; yet God sometimes allows us to fall into grievous sin that we may learn how dependent we are upon his sustaining grace. We are prone to forget that."

"Yes, sir," answered the young man, while an accusing conscience applied the words thus wisely spoken. The religious atmosphere he breathed in the home which had opened its doors to receive him, had wrought a wondrous change in his feelings. The Tuesday evening prayer meeting, also, with its simple services, had deeply impressed him. He did not scan the faces of those present, but he knew, by unmistakable signs, that the Spirit of the Lord was moving upon many hearts. He learned the secret of Father Merrill's influence, and acknowledged the guiding hand of Providence in leading him to such a friend.

Frank Clifford and Brent Murray were present at this meeting, the former with the hope of both doing and getting good, the latter to while away an evening, gratify his curiosity, and assert his independence. Jennie did not accompany him. Without being forbidden to do so, it was made necessary that she should remain at home.

"I did want to go to Mr. Merrill's this evening," she said to her mother, when they were

left alone. "I'm sure it couldn't do me any hurt. Do you think it could, mother?"

"No, my dear," answered Mrs. Murray, with a sigh. "I am glad Brent decided to go. He needs such influences more than you do. I hope the companionship of Frank Clifford will do him good. Do you read your Bible now, Jennie?"

"Not much," was the reply. "I liked it when we all read together; but now I don't care much about it. Mother, don't you wish old Elspeth would come and live with us again?"

"I wish I could see her, my child. I do believe she would nurse me back to health. But we won't talk about her. Your father said there was an interesting story in the new magazine, and I should like to have you read it to me."

The reading was interrupted by the return of Brent, who had so much to report that the entrance of his father was unheeded. "Clifford is a wonderful talker," he was just saying. "Why, those people out there listened to him

as though he was an angel; and if there isn't something in the religion he professes, it's the grandest mistake I ever heard of. He says people who ridicule the Bible know nothing of it, and those who despise religion are either ignorant of its true nature, or willfully hardened against its truth. I don't talk it off as he did," added Brent. "You ought to hear him for yourselves."

"He is a *young* man to make such sweeping assertions," remarked Mr. Murray.

"Yes, sir; but there are a good many younger ones that make sweeping assertions on the other side; and I couldn't help thinking that he has the best of it. Any way, he lives up to what he professes, and lives well; while those on the other side live bad. 'Twas a queer looking crowd out there; but they were in dead earnest. Two or three talked, using the most outlandish words; but they knew what they meant, and I guess the rest did too. 'Twas too bad you couldn't go, Jen. We'll try again next time."

"Brent, do you know what you are talking

about?" asked Mr. Murray, sternly. "You know I don't believe in any of this nonsense, and don't wish my family to have anything to do with it. I am a better judge of the merits of the case than you can be."

"Yes, sir; but I think we should be allowed to judge for ourselves, especially if we have souls of our own, as most people seem to think we have."

What perversity prompted the young man to say this! Astonished at his own rashness, he hesitated whether to leave the room or make an apology. He did neither. Looking up, his eye rested upon a picture of his dead brother, and instantly there flashed upon his memory the teachings of Elspeth Bawn, and the prayer he had learned to repeat. "I suppose you judged for yourself, father."

"I don't understand how this subject came up for discussion at this time," said Mr. Murray, evasively. "Your mother is quite too weak to be excited."

"I don't wish to excite her," was Brent's reply. "I love my mother, but I can't see any

reason why we shouldn't talk of religion and the Bible, as well as other people. I don't think it would trouble mother at all, if she didn't hear anything said against them."

"Brent, leave the room," now commanded his father, thoroughly exasperated.

The young man rose to obey, yet staid to clasp his mother's hands and kiss her lips. Jennie followed her brother; and then Mr. Murray began to upbraid his wife for the scene which had just taken place.

"I can't bear any more," she said, at length, in a husky voice. "If you have any mercy, stop talking to me in that way. It is killing me; and I know you are wrong. I *know* you are wrong. Oh, my poor children!"

What her husband would have said in reply to this can not be known. The words had scarcely passed her lips when she swooned, and remained so long unconscious that he was obliged to call assistance. For a time it seemed that the soul had fled from its tenement of clay; and it was only after a physician had been summoned, and a powerful re-

storative administered, that Mrs. Murray was able to speak. Then it was only in answer to a question ; and, closing her eyes wearily, she lay motionless.

"Is she going to die?" asked Jennie.

"There is no immediate danger," was the reply of the good physician. "She may be nearly as well as usual to-morrow."

Brent stood by anxiously, yet saying not a word. He divined the cause of his mother's present suffering ; and while blaming himself, blamed his father still more. And Mr. Murray, in the agony of suspense, repented the bitter words he had spoken to his wife. For the first time in their married life she turned from him as he stooped to address her.

He rushed from her presence, up the stairs, and into an unoccupied room, where he could be alone. "My God!" he cried, wringing his hands, "is it true that I am killing my wife?" How often since Harry's death he had silenced her questionings, when he knew that thus he threw back upon her heart a load of doubt and trouble she could ill bear. Killing her!

Was it true? "God forgive me," he murmured, uttering, involuntarily, the prayer he contemned. He went below stairs, but his wife gave no sign of recognition as he entered her room. Brent was seated upon the couch, supporting her in his arms, and gazing down upon her with tear-dimmed eyes.

"She will need a good nurse with her to-night," said the physician. "One who understands sickness."

Mr. Murray was about to reply that he could care for his wife ; when she asked, "Do you think Mrs. Stearns would be willing to come? She told me she would come at any time ; and I don't think I should give her much trouble."

Brent, waiting for no permission, laid his mother gently down and hastened to the house of their neighbor. Mrs. Stearns was glad he came for her. She could leave home perfectly well ; and, sooner than she was expected, she was returning the greeting of Mr. Murray, who, although he had not desired her presence, thanked her for coming. Everything was arranged for the comfort of the invalid ;

and, as the hour of midnight approached, not a sound was heard in the house.

"Can't you compose yourself to sleep?" asked Mrs. Stearns, kindly, bending over her patient:

"I don't wish to sleep," was the reply, spoken almost in a whisper. "But, oh, Mrs. Stearns, I do wish you to pray with me. Ask God to show me the truth and help me to do my duty. I know you can pray, because you are a Christian, and I need, oh! so much, to be prayed for."

In her eagerness the speaker had clasped the hand of her friend, which she still retained as this friend assumed the attitude of prayer. No well studied phrases and carefully chosen words formed the petition which was here presented at the mercy-seat. It was a simple expression of the heart's needs; a prayer for light and strength, and a realizing sense of God's presence.

"And do you really feel that God heard you?" asked Mrs. Murray, when the prayer was ended.

"I know that he did," was the reply. "I feel his presence, and you can safely cast all your cares and perplexities upon him."

"And, Mrs. Stearns, if you had made a promise which bound you to let some one else decide everything for you about religion, and then you couldn't do it, would the promise be binding?"

"Each soul must answer for itself in the day of judgment," said the Christian woman, after some hesitation. "Only Christ can stand between the soul and God; and no human being can give account for the deeds of another. Such a promise ought never to be made; and it seems to me that when made, it would be more honored in the breaking than the keeping. But I can not conceive of any one making such a promise."

"I made it," whispered Mrs. Murray, so softly that the words were only breathed. "I made it, and now my husband claims its fulfillment."

"God help you!" was the response. "Ask him, and he will show you a way out of your troubles."

"Will he? Will he? And how shall I know?"

"By your inward convictions of duty."

This reply was not given until after a long silence, during which the speaker prayed for wisdom.

"And my husband?"

"Tell him your feelings honestly, and claim a release from your promise. At least, that is what I think I should do," added Mrs. Stearns, quickly. "I will pray for you, that you may be guided aright."

"Pray now," said Mrs. Murray. "Oh! you have done me good. I sent for you, because I must talk with some one."

Again the voice of prayer was heard, and again was the question asked, "Do you believe God hears you?" Then, after some further conversation, the invalid slept quietly until morning.

"I am so much better," were the first words she spoke. "Thank you, a thousand times, for coming to me. I remember all you said, and I shall try to do as you told me."

"Don't trust me too much," was the reply. "Trust God."

"I will, Mrs. Stearns. I think I do; and it seems to me now that I can persuade my whole family to trust him. I must try; and I wish Mr. Stearns would talk to Brent. I am very anxious for him, and I am sure nothing but religion will keep him right in this world."

"We will do what we can for your son," answered Mrs. Stearns, although she knew that her husband would not think best to make a personal appeal to young Murray. "Please don't talk any more now. I will remember you in my prayers."

"Thank you," was the whispered reply. "Perhaps I shall sleep."

When the east was crimsoned with the sun's first rays, the kind neighbor went into the hall, where she met Mr. Murray, to whom she reported the condition of her patient. She saw that he was looking haggard and worn, knew that there was an unusual tenderness in his voice; but she did not know that he had

shared her watch, listening often at the closed door of his wife's room, and then turning away with self-accusations and fears. Once he had heard a murmuring voice, which reminded him of his mother's prayers, and, despite all loving memories and all fears, his old hatred for holy things was, for the time, revived.

There must be no such prayers under his roof. His wife must think as he did, and his children must allow him to think for them in religious matters. There should be no appeal from his judgment. As the head of his family, had he not a right to regulate their conduct? He would not doubt this right, yet how to effect his purpose sorely puzzled him. He loved his family, and he could not deny the fact that each possessed an individual soul, which *might*, probably *would*, exist through all eternity.

Brent came into the room, wearing a look which Mr. Murray had learned to recognize as indicating a determined purpose. The nature of that purpose was half revealed by the question which followed quick upon the morning greeting.

"Do you really think I was to blame for mother's sickness last night?"

"I think you were to blame for introducing a subject of conversation which always causes unhappiness when it is mentioned."

"But why should it, father? It don't make other people unhappy. And another thing. I don't wish to be disrespectful; but I think you reproached mother for what I had done and said. She had nothing to do with my going to the prayer meeting, and she never asked a question about it. If I become a Christian, and join the church, and take to preaching, the same as Mr. Stearns, there won't be anybody to blame but myself; and if there's any trouble about it, I'll bear it myself. I don't know sure whether there's any truth in religion or not, but I mean to find out, and everybody has a right to know for themselves. There's something wrong about mother. She isn't happy. She wants to read the Bible, and no one has a right to prevent her doing so."

Brent Murray had not intended to say so

much as this, but having once commenced, the thoughts which had been revolving in his mind would find utterance. His father had been so astonished by his assertions, that it was not until he paused and waited for a reply, that one was given.

"And so you pretend to teach me my duty," was said, coldly.

The young man's eyes flashed, and his lips quivered, as he answered, "No, sir; I don't pretend to teach you. But I pretend to read what is plainly written; and I'm not willing to see my mother die, when she ought to live."

Here the entrance of Jennie interrupted him, and his father was glad to leave; but it couldn't be expected that the subject would be thus dismissed. Brent was too much excited to be silent, and his sister almost trembled at what she heard, even as she acknowledged its justice.

What passed between Mr. Murray and his wife only God and themselves knew. He came to the breakfast table as if in a dream,

eating little, and speaking only when absolutely necessary. Not angry did he seem, but perplexed and troubled. From the table he went to his wife's room, and not long after he carried her to her favorite place on the lounge, in what was called "mother's parlor."

There her children saw her, and Brent observed that his father manifested more than usual solicitude for her comfort. In the afternoon, when he returned from Mr. Stearns's, there was a Bible upon the table, which augured well for his mother's happiness.

"I am very much better," she said, in answer to his inquiries. "I hope you remembered to thank Mrs. Stearns for her kindness in taking care of me last night."

"I did, mother; and she told me to tell you she would come again at any time. I don't see how she can, with so much to do at home; but I suppose she knows."

"Yes; but I think we must show our appreciation of her kindness in something more substantial than words. Mr. Stearns's salary

is not very large, and they must miss what Mr. Merrill used to do for them."

"And just think, mother, of three boys and two little girls to be dressed, and, some way, they never seem shabby or dirty. I went into the sitting-room this afternoon, and if I could tell about such things, Mrs. Stearns was cutting a jacket out of an old coat. I've got a dozen old coats."

Mr. Murray had gone to the next town on business, and did not return until late.

Frank Clifford, accompanied by Sancho, came in to inquire for Mrs. Murray's health, and was easily persuaded to spend the evening. Talking of various subjects, he gave evidence of the home training he had received, making him more thoughtful than many of his superiors in age.

"We shall be happy to see you at any time," said Mrs. Murray, when their guest rose to go. "And please tell Mrs. Stearns that I shall be very glad to see her, when she can find time to visit me."

The clergyman's wife was one of those rare

women who, either as the result of natural gifts or acquired habits, find time for doing whatever is necessary. It may be that something was due to her husband, who gave her the aid of his sympathy, and in various ways lightened her labors. Then, too, her children, taught to care for themselves and each other, were as good-natured and happy a group as ever blessed a mother, who, while neglecting none of their needs, claimed the right to live, breathe, and move for her own well being. Of course she did not long delay her visit to Mrs. Murray, by whom she was welcomed as a dear friend.

"You can never know how much good you have done me," said the grateful woman. "Your words and your prayers gave me new life, and now I am going forward, with the Bible for my guide. That terrible promise was like a burden weighing me down. I am released from it now; and oh! Mrs. Stearns, I am so thankful to you. Ever since Harry's death, I have been mourning for him. It seemed as though he must come back to me.

Now I would not call him back if I could. I believe he is in heaven, and I trust I shall go to him. I don't know as I am a Christian; but God seems very near to me, and I am willing to trust myself in his hands."



CHAPTER XIII.

GEORGE ESTY AS A SCHOOL TEACHER.

GEORGE, did you ever keep school?" asked Mr. Merrill, coming into the house, after a long talk with one of the neighbors.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "I taught two winters before I left home."

"Well, think you could manage our school? The master that was hired wan't good scholar enough to get his papers, so the committee has got to hunt up somebody else. I told Mr. Merriam about you; and if you want to try your hand with our children, I guess I can get the chance for you."

"I should be very glad of it; but I am a stranger, and the people may not be willing to trust me."

"That an't the thing. I'll trust you, and the district 'll look to me if there's any trouble. You might go over to Mr. Stearns's, and let him ask you some questions; and we can go to-night as well as any time. I'll call and ask Dorcas to come over and stay with mother."

George Esty had not been off the farm since he first set foot upon it; and it was with some trepidation that he prepared to accompany his friend. But he had resolved to do what he could; and sure of his ability to pass a respectable examination, he gained courage as they drove towards the village. Mr. Stearns was at home. Mr. Merrill told his errand, and business was soon dispatched. The next morning Mr. Merriam called at his neighbor's, and before leaving had engaged a teacher for the winter school in district number six.

"I guess they was waiting for you," said Mrs. Merrill, with a smile. "School most always begins before this time; but I'm glad it didn't this year. Dorcas thought 'twould be a fine thing to have you for master, and she's a good deal looked up to in the neighborhood.

She wants her children to learn. You won't have no trouble about their behaving well. There won't be but one trouble. I've got so used to having you round that I don't want to spare you; and now John can't come back, I counted on your staying."

"But I thought you would board me," replied the young man, in a tone of disappointment.

"Well, that an't the way they do, to have the master board at one place all the time; but I guess father can manage it."

This *was* easily managed to the satisfaction of all concerned. The teacher was to work for his board, and the district have the benefit of the arrangement. During the days which intervened before the opening of school, there was much curiosity to see the new master; and, as was natural, people wished to know something of his antecedents. Many questions were asked, which, however, Mr. Merrill was able to answer in such a way as to leave no suspicion of mystery. The minister vouched for his moral character, reporting so

much of the letter written by Mr. Clapp, as seemed desirable; so that George Esty entered upon his new duties under favorable auspices.

"I want you to open your school with prayer every morning." Father Merrill said this, adding, "You will, won't you?"

"I don't know as I can," was the reply. "I never did. Is it absolutely necessary?"

"I think so," replied the old man. "'Twill be a new thing here; but the children need something new, and you need to ask God's blessing upon your work."

"But I am not a Christian, Mr. Merrill. How can I pray?"

"If you an't a Christian, there's so much the more need of your praying. That an't any excuse for not doing your duty. Just remember that all your life. You're under just as much obligation to live a pure, holy life, as the best Christian in the world. If I was going to keep our school, shouldn't you think strange if I didn't pray with the scholars?"

"Yes, sir; I suppose I should."

"Well, I shall think strange if you don't. Seems to me you'll need God's help most as much as I should. There's the children coming now, and they'll expect you to tell a story. But don't forget what I've said. It's a wonder how them children take to you."

As it was Sabbath evening, Maggie and Henry Wyman came in, better dressed than usual, each bringing a new book, which aunt Dorcas had bought for them. Room was made around the table; grandpa Merrill heard them recite their verses, and then the books were examined. After this Maggie asked for the story Mr. Esty had promised to tell them; and although the young man would have much preferred to keep silence, the interest of his audience soon inspired him, so that he forgot all else.

The next morning half a hundred scholars greeted the master; some timidly, scarcely daring to raise their eyes to his face, and others with a bold, unblushing stare; while a few said, "Good morning, sir."

At a signal from him seats were quickly

taken ; and at the second rap quiet prevailed, while he looked around upon his companions. He opened the Bible, read a few verses, and then clasping his hands, said, " Let us pray." To do this was less difficult than he had feared, and the influence upon those who looked and listened was truly wonderful. As he prayed earnestly that the blessing of God would rest upon teacher and scholars, he felt strengthened for his duties, which were cheerfully performed. At night he could say, with all sincerity, that it had been a pleasant day.

And what report did the children carry to their homes ? As various as were the speakers, since no two would receive quite the same impression. Yet all were agreed in thinking that " they'd got to mind the new master ;" and this conclusion being reached, it would be easy for him to enforce obedience, especially as it was conceded on all hands that he was a first-rate scholar.

About this time he received letters from home, in answer to, one written by himself, and indorsed by Mr. Stearns. His parents

deeply grieved and mortified though they were, did not reproach him, or question his wisdom in going among strangers.

" You must live for yourself," wrote his mother. " But remember, my son, that not a day passes when I don't pray God to make you a Christian. I want you to succeed in the world, and I believe you can yet, for all that's happened ; but more than anything else, I want you to be a Christian. Your trouble will be over then, for God prospers all those who seek his blessing upon honest, faithful, persevering labor."

" Your mother's got the right of it," remarked Father Merrill, to whom this letter was read. " Folks needn't tell me that Christians have to give up everything, and carry a cross all through this world for the sake of wearing a crown in another. 'Tan't so. The Christian stands a better chance for getting a good living, and prospering in the world, than one that an't a Christian. If a man's lazy, or shiftless, or a bad calculator, if he's a member of the church there'll be somebody ready to

hold him up 'longside of some forehanded man, that don't make no pretensions to religion. Han't you ever seen that done, George?"

"Yes, sir, I have," was 'the reply; "but I never thought of it in that way."

"Well, I have, a good many times; and it's strange to me folks don't see how inconsistent 'tis; as though praying and reading the Bible ever hindered a man's crops growing, or made his stock turn out bad. But I've seen a good many men that turned right round after they were converted, and went to work with such a good will that their luck changed, as they called it; though, for my part, I don't believe in luck. We've got to look at things in the long-run, to calculate what they're worth. If a man makes light weight, or short measure, he'll, maybe, get more money for one year; but that'll be about all, and ten chances to one if he don't get found out too soon for that. And getting rich, any way, by underhand work, don't bring a blessing with it. Things has changed since Testament times, when the

disciples had to lay down their lives to prove their faith. For my part, I don't see no great self-denial in being a Christian nowadays, and I don't like to hear so much talk about crosses and fiery trials. We don't live in martyr times."

So far as his influence extended, Father Merrill preached a strong, life-giving religion, which should quicken the dry bones of sloth and idleness, and inspire its believers with new zeal and earnestness in all honest labor. True, none knew better than himself that it is not easy to keep in subjection the lower nature, while the Christian reaches up to the heights, from whence cometh salvation; but in his sometimes homely way, he contended that even this involved less self-denial than the opposite course. He recommended godliness, both for the life that now is, and for that which is to come.

"You see," continued the old man, "if we could get this neighborhood converted, there'd be better farmers all along the road. The barns would be patched up, and the houses

would look better, inside and out. There's old Veezy Butterworth; now I shall be disappointed if he don't go to work next spring, and pick up the stones on his land, and raise some decent crops. He han't been round lately, except Tuesday nights. Mother, do you know anything about him?"

"Dorcas said Hiram see him picking up stones yesterday. He said he'd got one field so it looked pretty smooth, and he meant to keep on till snow comes."

"Well, I hope that won't be long," responded Mr. Merrill. "Snow's held off remarkable. We han't had nothing yet but little flurries, with strong winds; and I'm hoping for a good thick coat."

The weeks went by prosperously. School was giving satisfaction, and people were glad that the young man happened to come along when he did. The children were ready to believe whatever he told them, and do whatever he desired. There was good progress, without blows or hard words. Altogether, the neighborhood was "looking up."

The prayer meetings exerted an influence upon the school, and the school helped to give tone to the meetings. These were well sustained, many young people coming from different parts of the town, and all giving earnest attention. Frank Clifford was always present, Brent Murray occasionally, and twice Jennie had accompanied her brother.

Dorcas Armstrong was the only person in the neighborhood who seemed to remain entirely unmoved. Every Tuesday evening she sat down alone, resolved to forget what was going on around her. Mr. Butterworth did not come on Wednesday to tell her what he had heard. He didn't "want Dorcas to have no hard feelin's agin him," and as he "couldn't keep from talkin' about the meetin'," he ceased his visits.

After the first heavy snow, feeling somewhat anxious about him, and having heard the children say that he had been absent from one prayer meeting, she drove over to his home. It was a poor, tumble-down looking place, with rickety sheds and prostrate fences. There

were no paths about the house—only the footprints of the owner, and a shed track, leading to a wood lot not far distant.

Mrs. Butterworth opened a sheltered door, and greeted her visitor. "For massy sake! who'd a thought of seein' you. I'm proper glad, though. I wish he was to home to take care of your horse; but he an't."

"I can take care of my own horse," was the reply. "I'm used to it, and here's a good place all ready for him."

"Yes, he's been to work there all through the storm, clearin' out, and you've no idee what a mess of dry wood he found. 'Twas a massy to us, too, 'cause we han't got much. He's wonderful changed, Dorcas."

"Well, I'm glad of it," answered the visitor, a little impatiently, stamping the snow from her feet. "You've got a good fire," she added, as they entered the kitchen.

"Yes, we have most everything good now. Take off your things. I'm proper glad you come. He'll be home 'fore long. You was plannin' to stop a spell, wan't you?"

"I hadn't any plans about it. 'Twas so long since Mr. Butterworth made us a visit, I thought I'd come over and see what's the trouble."

"There an't no trouble, Dorcas—not a mite. But you see he kind o' thought you didn't want to hear about the meetin's, and he's so full on't he couldn't help talkin'—so he staid away."

"But the children said he wan't out last Tuesday night."

"No; he'd been hard to work all day, and I told him he'd better stay to home, but I shan't say nothin' agin; he didn't take no comfort restin', and he'll go next time for all me. He's gone to the wood lot now. T'other day he picked up a heap of branches, and he's goin' to bring 'em up. He'll keep the fire goin'."

"Well, that's a good thing," said Dorcas, and looking around she observed that some improvement had been made in other respects. The most noticeable feature of the room was a small stand, occupying a warm corner, and upon it was an open Bible. The clumsily

mounted glasses resting on its pages were Mr. Butterworth's, and his wife was careful not to disturb them as she moved the stand to make place for a rocking-chair.

"I guess I'll empty my basket first," remarked the guest, when she was invited to a seat in this, the only really comfortable chair the house afforded. "I brought over a few little things."

"Well, now, Dorcas, I don't call them little things. They'll do us heaps of good, and I'm much obleeged to you, and so he'll be. Miss Merrill, now, she sent us some tea, that I've been keepin' 'gainst time o' need. You're good to think on us, Dorcas. Seems as though folks was better'n they used to be, though you was always good. Now, shan't I git dinner, and you eat with us, 'fore you go home? 'Twould be neighborly, and he'd like it."

"Yes, Miss Butterworth, you can get dinner, and we'll have a cup of tea together," was the reply which gladdened this poor woman.

"I an't in any hurry. Hiram's keeping

house, with a bad cold, so I could leave just as well as not."

"Them children of your'n are to school, an't they?"

"Yes; they won't stay at home so long as this master keeps, if they're able to go."

"Well, that's what all the neighbors say, and I'm proper glad we've got such a good master. It's all come through havin' Father Merrill out here, too, han't it, Dorcas? It beats me how things has changed. There's that Mason farm now. They say it's turned off good crops, and he's kind o' waking up 'bout our'n. Guess he's been follerin' some o' your advice. He's calculatin' ready 'bout next spring."

The best of everything in the house was brought forward to do honor to the occasion; and by the time dinner was on the table Mr. Butterworth had returned from the wood lot, and made himself as presentable as circumstances would allow. He was glad to see Dorcas, as he said, in his poor way; but when seated at the table he seemed somewhat em-

barrassed, while his wife looked at him expectantly. One deprecating glance at their guest, and then he prayed that God would bless the food before them, and give them thankful hearts.

"I didn't know but you were sick," remarked the visitor, to break the awkward silence which followed.

"No, I han't been sick," was the reply. "I've been busy, and then my mind was runnin' purty much on one thing, and I thought 'twan't best to come your way. But I'm glad to see ye, Dorcas."

"I see you've been fixing up round your house."

"Yes, I've been tryin' to do a little. I ought to done it afore now; but ye see I'm jist beginnin' to know my duty."

It was easy to see that the old man's thoughts tended ever to one engrossing subject; but at length Miss Armstrong succeeded in getting him to talk of his farm, advising him what to do, and telling him how to make the best of his resources. She praised him for what he



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had already done, and offered him the best of seed for sowing and planting.

Profuse in his thanks for visit, advice, and gifts, he stood by her sleigh when she was ready to start, looking at her wistfully, until she asked, "What is it you've got to say to me?"

"I wan't ye to be a Christian," was his quick response. "Don't lay it up agin' me; but I pray for ye, and I do want ye to pray for yerself. Don't ye never think on't, Dorcas?"

For her life she could not have answered. She was gone before the old man recovered from the effort he had made, and he returned to the house sadly troubled. Not more troubled was he, however, than the woman who drove through the snow at such speed that all who saw her wondered. It did seem to her that she was haunted by the ghost of religion. But for her keen sense of justice, she would have blamed her cousin for establishing prayer meetings in the neighborhood. She had one hope of relief. With the spring these meet-

ings would be discontinued, and people would settle back into their old places.

She was less certain of this when, some hours later, Henry Wyman asked her if she was willing that Maggie and himself should attend church the next Sabbath. "Grandpa Merrill says we can ride with him; and we should like to go if you're willing," he added.

"You can go for all me," was the ungracious reply, which brought tears to the boy's eyes, and made him wish that he had not proffered his request. But Miss Armstrong, regretting her petulance, hastened to make amends, by saying, "I'm perfectly willing you should go, and I'll have your clothes all ready. There is no need either of your crowding the neighbors. You can take the sleigh and the old horse and go independent. Maybe Hiram'll want to go with you. He'll want to wear his new coat somewhere. If they go once they'll want to go again," she said to herself after Henry had left her. "It's the way with children. But I can't answer for other folks' souls, and I won't hinder their having their own way about religion. It wouldn't be right."

If Mr. Murray could have accepted this truth with like equanimity, his own happiness and that of his family would have been greatly enhanced. That he had made some concessions was apparent to all in the house; and it was equally apparent that he had not done this willingly. He was careful to throw a newspaper over the Bible whenever he sat down in his wife's parlor, and he never saw his children ready for church on the Sabbath without in some way manifesting his disapproval.

Not so Dorcas Armstrong. She assisted the children in their preparations, and told them pleasantly she hoped they would enjoy the day. They were well dressed; a little bashful in the presence of so many people, but grandpa and grandma Merrill helped to give them confidence. They enjoyed everything they saw and heard, carrying home with their library books a host of pleasant memories. Brent Murray had spoken to Henry, and Mrs. Stearns had noticed him.

"He said he was glad to see us, and he

hoped we'd come every Sunday," whispered the boy to his sister. "I mean to go every Sunday."

This determination he repeated at Mr. Merrill's in the evening ; but the next Sabbath a furious storm kept him at home, and before two weeks had elapsed he was prostrated with sickness.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE EPIDEMIC.

AN epidemic was sweeping through the town. In nearly every family where there were children, one at least was stricken down. For aught any knew to the contrary the disease had come on the wings of the wind, and despite all precautions it spread with fearful rapidity. Schools were closed, and all neighborhood meetings, for whatever purposes, were discontinued. No more visiting among old or young. Many even absented themselves from the Sabbath services.

"I don't want anybody to come into my house unless they're willing," said Dorcas Armstrong to her hired man, who had reported what he heard in the village. "I don't

blame anybody for being careful, but I'm going right along same as ever. I'll take care of my own sick, and help other folks if I can. I expect nothing but Maggie 'll be down next, and if she is, 'twill go hard with her."

"So 'twill, and hard with you too," was the reply. "I don't see how the work's going to be done. I can keep up my end out doors, but you'll need help in the house."

"Where should I get it?" asked Miss Armstrong. "They say you can't get a girl to go where this fever is. I'll pull through some way, if you'll stand by and not be frightened off."

"You can bet sure on that," answered Hiram. "And there's the master coming with Miss Merrill; so we an't left yet."

"Why, cousin Mary, I'm glad and sorry both to see you, and Mr. Esty, too," said the tired woman, when these friends came in. "I didn't know but you'd be afraid to come."

"I've seen too much sickness to be afraid of doing my duty," replied Mrs. Merrill, cheerfully. "I wanted to come, and George wanted to come with me."

"Yes, Miss Armstrong," added the young man, "I shall be very happy to assist you in any way that I can."

"I'm much obliged to you, but I don't think I need any great help just now. If Maggie comes down, I shall be glad to have somebody lend a hand."

"Any signs of that, cousin Dorcas?"

"Yes, I han't told her, but she'll be down to-morrow or next day, unless the medicine she's taking has a better effect than it did on Henry. I'm tryin' to get ready for the worst. The doctor thinks Henry's constitution 'll carry him through, and I'm of his mind. It comes hardest on some in this neighborhood that don't know how to keep comfortable when they're well. I pity the poor children."

No one had reason to pity the children under her care, except for suffering which she could not prevent. As was expected, Henry came bravely through the crisis of his sickness, and was in a fair way to regain his health in due time; but Maggie's life seemed to hang by a thread.

"Nothing but good nursing 'll save her," said Mrs. Merrill, on her return from a visit to the sick child. "Dorcas knows that as well as I do, and she'll do all any body can do. 'Twould almost kill her if one of them children should die. You're going over some time to-day, an't you, father. Henry says he wants to see you."

"Yes, I'll go. I'm glad them children are so well provided for. Seems to me sometimes that Dorcas don't lack but one thing. She'll have reason to be thankful if her family's spared when there's so many deaths. The doctor's most worn out; and he says if there's many more cases he don't know how they're going to be taken care of."

Soon after this conversation, grandpa Merrill went over to see these children, who had grown to be very dear to him; and he had not been long in the house, when Henry said to aunt Dorcas, "I do want to hear grandpa Merrill pray. Are you willing he should?"

"To be sure I am, child," was the reply. "Why shouldn't I be. Ask him to pray with

you, if you want him to. Perhaps Maggie would like to hear him, too."

Never since the funeral of Mr. Armstrong had there been an audible prayer in this house, unless, indeed, some workman or these children had murmured a petition which only God had heard. Standing where the clergyman then stood, now stood Father Merrill, so that he could be distinctly heard by all within the house.

She who had so often said she wished never again to hear the voice of prayer, now listened; and, strange as it may seem, this was like a new revelation to her. She heard no meaningless words, no irreverent repetitions of the dear or august names by which we designate our Lord and our God.

None of these. When Father Merrill opened his lips in prayer, he spoke from a full heart. There was no need to fill an awkward gap in his thoughts, or simulate an earnestness he did not feel. For nearly half a century he had held intimate communion with God, and his speech gave evidence of the fact. When

he closed, both children reached out their hands toward him; and going from one to the other, he heard how glad they were.

"You asked God to make me well," said Maggie, feebly.

"Yes, I asked him to make you well, if he sees it's for the best," was the old man's reply.

"Don't you want to get well?"

"Yes, sir, because I an't sure I shall go to heaven if I die. But I've asked God to forgive my sins."

"Then no doubt he has forgiven you, my child," and now you just go to sleep. You've nothing to fear."

"You're getting a good deal tired out," said Mr. Merrill to his cousin, soon after.

"I guess I *am* some tired," she replied. "I'm anxious, too, about Maggie. It don't seem as though I could bear to have her die. I've tried to do my duty by them children," she added. "It's likely I've made a good many mistakes; but I've meant right. It almost seems as though they belonged to me."

"They belong to you and God," responded her visitor. "There couldn't any mother done more for them than you have since they've been sick. We all know that; and you've kept up yourself wonderful. Hiram's done well, too. You've been the making of him, Dorcas."

"I don't know about that. He's done well, and the master's helped him. I declare, cousin Seth, that young man beats me. 'Twas hard work for me to believe his story; but I don't doubt a word of it now. Is he going to stay with you?"

"Yes, unless there's a better opening for him somewhere else. John is going to carry on the farm at home; and George says he'd rather work for me than anybody else. I'm hoping he'll go back to the city where he came from sometime. There's been a good many changes in a year, Dorcas, and I hope we shall improve them. Mother'll come over any time you need her. George and me can keep house."

"You're very good. If I need her I'll send

over ;" and, as she said this, the speaker went back to her work.

Weary work it was — watching, hoping, and yet not praying. Maggie was so patient, and so grateful for every attention, that tears came often to the eyes of one who had seldom wept, even when her days were darkest. At length the child was pronounced to be out of danger, and then how happy were the days! Dorcas Armstrong had much for which to be thankful, since these children were to her like her very own.

The light had gone out in many a dwelling, as many a parent mourned for the loved and lost. Some few families had not felt the touch of disease. The parsonage had been passed by, although Mr. and Mrs. Stearns had visited the sick and dying through all the town. People began to breathe more freely, congratulating themselves that the worst was over, when it was known that three of the minister's children had been taken down the same day.

"And no extra help to be had for love nor

money," was the remark which usually followed this announcement.

Mrs. Merrill, having heard this, decided at once to go to the parsonage; and would have done so, had not Dorcas Armstrong interfered. Maggie Wyman was spending the day with grandma Merrill, and Dorcas said, "If you'll keep Maggie here with you, I'll go over myself to-morrow morning, and stay as long as they need me. They'll be better or worse within a few days. I han't any work that's driving, and I'm well rested; so if you'll take care of my little girl, I can go as well as not. Mr. Stearns and his wife have been very good to call while the children were sick, and I shall be glad to do them a favor. They an't much used to me at the minister's; but what they want is somebody that can work, and that an't afraid of the fever."

There was not much discussion in regard to the matter. Miss Armstrong, of course, carried her point; and the next morning Hiram drove with her to the parsonage.

"I've come to help you," was her first salu-

tation, as she entered the house, without ceremony. "I thought, maybe, you'd like some help."

"Indeed, we do," responded the clergyman, heartily. "My wife hasn't slept for two nights, and I don't know as she has closed her eyes in the day time."

"You don't look as though you'd done much sleeping yourself," said the visitor.

"I don't feel as though I had," was the reply. "Our children are very sick, and we have found it impossible to obtain help. Everybody is worn out with sickness at home."

"There's one that an't," said Dorcas, in a tone calculated to inspire the listener with courage. "Cousin Mary was coming; but I told her I was the one. If I can see Mrs. Stearns, I think I can take her place, so she can rest."

This woman was one of the last whom the inmates of the parsonage would have expected to come to their relief, yet was she none the less welcome. For once in her life, Mrs.

Stearns was nearly exhausted, although she did not acknowledge this until rest was possible for her. The children received their new nurse as a friend, and the experience she had gained in the preceding weeks enabled her to do the right thing at the right time. The day wore on, with no perceptible change in the little patients, except that they complained less of suffering.

The physician considered this a favorable symptom; and without giving any positive opinion as to the result of the sickness, encouraged the parents to hope for the recovery of their darlings. "Dorcas will do more for them than I can," he said, generously. "She's a wonderful woman; and if she isn't a Christian, she ought to be; though it's my opinion she's got a good deal more religion now than her father ever had."

"He was called a Christian man," remarked Mr. Stearns.

"I know that," was the reply. "But fifty such men would sink the town, and make us all United States paupers. I hope I'm a

Christian ; but I tell you what 'tis, Mr. Stearns, I'm afraid we don't, many of us, show the best side of religion. We've got to live in this world, and do something while we're here, same as other people, and we ought to do it a little better. That's Father Merrill's doctrine, and he'll prove, before he dies, that godliness is profitable unto all things, if he did give up his place, when, by a stretch of conscience, he might have kept it. There's a good deal about Dorcas like him, if she is an unbeliever, as Deacon Wightman calls her. Now, while she's here, you and your wife take some rest. She'll do as well for your children as you can ; and when she's done what she feels able, she'll tell you."

Dorcas remained six days, and at the end of that time there was reason to believe that good nursing and skillful treatment had been blessed. "I can come again, for a while," remarked she, as she was preparing to leave.

"You are very kind," Mrs. Stearns replied. "I don't know what we should have done

without you ; and I'm sure I don't know how to express my gratitude. You have been like a tower of strength to us all, and God will reward you for your kindness. I hope you will find everything right at home."

"I've no doubt of that," was the response. "I've got good neighbors. Cousin Mary promised to look after things."

"I almost envy you your neighbors," now said the clergyman's wife. "It seemed to me a calamity to us all when Father Merrill moved away, and I am hardly reconciled to it yet, although Mr. Murray's people are very kind. You are acquainted with them, Miss Armstrong?"

"I've seen Mr. Murray and his son, but I've never been into the house since cousin Seth lived there. They've invited me, but I said I wouldn't go, and it's likely I shan't, unless I'm needed."

"You thought your cousins ought to remain there?"

"I did at first. I couldn't think of anything else. But I know better now. They won't

want for anything while I live, and we need them in our neighborhood. 'Twas a hard case, though, for them to give up their home."

"Do you think they will ever come back?"

"I don't know. I hope not, as far as I'm concerned. I'd rather pay them something for staying where they be. I know Ben Goddard talked about buying the place back."

"Yes; and some one told Mr. Stearns that no doubt he would be able to do it in a few years. The mill is running night and day at great profits; and if Father Merrill had been willing to let his friends raise the money and take a mortgage, Mr. Goddard could have paid it without any trouble. I've always been sorry the old gentleman didn't give his consent to that."

"Well, I don't know," answered Dorcas. "I suppose he had reasons for doing as he did, and I an't the only one that's been helped by his coming into the neighborhood. I guess it was all for the best."

"Yes, Miss Armstrong. There was a providence in it, and we may live to know why it

was allowed. Such an example of honesty is a mighty power for good."

Frank Clifford was at the door with Don harnessed to a handsome cutter, and in this Dorcas was soon comfortably seated. A light fall of snow had improved the roads, so that sleighing was quite a pleasure; and as this was remarked, some criticisms were made upon the really handsome horse which bore them along so rapidly.

"When my guardian bought Don, I thought him a beauty," said his owner.

"And so he is," was the reply. "I've noticed him a good many times. I see he's broken to saddle and harness both."

"Yes, ma'am. I wanted my mother to enjoy him with me; and now I am very glad, as cousin Stearns finds him convenient."

"No doubt of it. I guess he always depended upon cousin Seth for a horse, as well as a good many other favors. But Mr. Murray's a good neighbor."

"Very kind," was the reply. "They have been very kind to me. They invited me to

make my home with them while the children are sick; but I thought I might be of some use to my cousins."

When this was said they were quite at the end of their drive, and with the injunction to be sure and come for her if she was needed, Dorcas Armstrong bade her attendant good by. As she expected, all had gone well in her absence. Henry had gained strength remarkably. He had made a visit to grandpa Merrill's, and grandma had been over to see him every day.

"But I'm real glad to see you, aunt Dorcas," said the boy, heartily.

"And I'm real glad to see you," she answered. "I've thought a good deal about you and Maggie. I won't send for her to-night, but to-morrow we'll get round into the old track."

Mrs. Merrill had been over in the morning; but this did not prevent a second visit in the evening.

"George don't make nothing of harnessing the horse and waiting upon an old woman,"

she remarked, by way of apology for coming so often. "I heard they were better at the minister's; but I wanted to know the particulars."

The particulars were told, and then the cousins discussed various matters of interest, while the young men talked of spring's work and political news.

"Be they all well at Mr. Murray's?" asked the visitor.

"Yes; all but Mrs. Murray, and she's better than she has been," was the reply. "Mrs. Stearns says she's a very nice woman, and I see enough to know she's generous. I guess pretty much all the victuals I ate at Mr. Stearns's came ready cooked from her kitchen."

"I'm glad the minister's got such good neighbors," said Mrs. Merrill, cheerfully. "I was sorry to move away from him and his wife, and all them dear little children. I han't been discontented, though, a single day over here. Everybody's been good to us."

"And you've been good to everybody," Dorcas hastened to add. "If ever Ben Goddard

makes money enough, and is honest enough to buy back your old place, this neighborhood 'll go into mourning for your loss, though I'm free to own that you deserve a better house to live in than the one you've got."

"I'm satisfied, cousin Dorcas. Father and me han't nothing to complain of. Father'll enjoy bringing up the farm, and seeing what he can do with it. Betsy's coming back in two weeks, and we calculate to make a good mess of sugar. George says he understands the business, and father says there an't no reason why we shouldn't make all we want to use."

"There an't no reason," was the reply. "I used to talk to Dan Mason about it every year; but he was too lazy to do the work, and so they went without sugar while he sat in the chimney corner and smoked. He never made enough on that farm to pay the taxes and feed his family, though I told him he ought to lay up money. I guess you han't run behind-hand."

"No, cousin Dorcas; we han't. But there,

I might stay here and talk all night, when I ought to be at home. Come, George, I guess we'll be going."

"Yes, ma'am," answered George, wrapping about him the very shawl which had helped to conceal his face from the kind-hearted, but inquisitive stage driver. Mother Merrill had colored it, so that it could be worn without fear of recognition; and the stage driver had often seen his mysterious passenger without suspecting his identity.

The young man now corresponded regularly with his parents, and in his last letter gladdened their hearts by expressing the hope that he had become a Christian.

Since this hope had dawned upon him, he was even more anxious than before to retrieve his position. A sanctified ambition moved him to desire a broader sphere of action; and at one time he had almost resolved to return to the city, and obtain such employment as he could. But Father Merrill objected to this, as also did Mr. Stearns, who was consulted, and who frankly expressed his opinion.

"It will be time enough to talk of that next fall," said the clergyman. "Another six months here won't hurt you, and by that time Providence may open a door for you. Do the best you can where you are, my young friend, and wait."

So George Esty entered into Father Merrill's plans with a real enthusiasm, determined to do his best, and determined also that wherever he might be, he would endeavor to magnify the religion of Christ. The winter's experience had been of great benefit to him; and even now, while the memory of his sufferings thrilled him with agony, he thanked God that his downward career had been arrested.

A stranger seeing him with Mrs. Merrill, would have supposed them to be nearly related. It was no hardship for him to wait upon the good woman, who loved him more for all his troubles. Dorcas was thinking of this as they bade her good night and started for home.

The next morning Maggie was back in her favorite rocking-chair by the fire, glad to come,

although, as she assured everybody, she "had just as good a time as could be."

A fortnight went by with nothing to mark its passage, beyond the routine of every-day work, and the gradual swelling of buds on tree and shrub. Betsy had returned to Mr. Merrill's, and preparations were made for an active season, which the cold winds somewhat delayed.





CHAPTER XV.

SICKNESS OF BRENT MURRAY.

DORCAS ARMSTRONG was standing in the east door of her house, looking, with shaded eyes, at her sugar orchard, when the doctor drove up and accosted her, by expressing the hope that she hadn't "anything special to do that day."

"And what if I han't?" she answered.

"I want you to go over to Mr. Murray's. They need some help. One of the hired girls was taken sick day before yesterday, and Brent came down last evening. He ought to have given up before. Mr. Murray's gone, and I told his wife I'd come over and see if you could leave home. What say? That boy must have good nursing, or he'll have a short sickness. His mother was up most all night,

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and Mrs. Stearns is there this morning. Come, Dorcas; it don't generally take you so long to make up your mind to do anybody a favor."

"I'll go," she said. "But I can't go now. I must see cousin Mary first, and I must do some cooking. I'll try and get over there by noon."

"But I want you to go over with me, and I ought to be back there as soon as I can. I'll drive over to Father Merrill's with you, and somebody else can do the cooking. It's a case of pretty near life and death, Dorcas; and I'd rather trust your nursing than my doctoring."

It needed only this to set aside all thoughts of personal convenience on the part of her who was thus addressed. She was ready in the shortest possible time; and, during the drive, learned whatever was necessary of the peculiar symptoms of the patient, who was to be under her care.

Brent Murray was delirious; but no sooner did Miss Armstrong enter his room, than he

recognized her as the woman who had scolded him when he deserved it, and whom he must obey. He submitted to whatever she proposed, and although her touch did not bring healing, it quieted his ravings. He continued to talk, however, sometimes of his horse, sometimes of his lessons, sometimes of the Bible, and sometimes of Father Merrill's prayers.

"It's true, isn't it?" he murmured.

"Yes, it *is* true," replied his nurse.

"I knew it was," he said, with great emphasis. "Call father, so I can tell him. He says it's false; but he don't know. Father Merrill knows, and he told me. You know, too, don't you?"

"Yes, yes. I know all about it, so don't talk any more. I want you to go to sleep, so when your father comes you'll be able to tell him."

"Yes, I *must* tell him. You see, he won't let anybody else, and I must. We must all love God, and ask him to forgive our sins for Christ's sake. If we don't, we shall all be condemned, and there'll be no salvation for us. That's the way it is, isn't it? Isn't it?"

repeated Brent Murray, eagerly, waiting for a reply. "My head aches so I can't think very well; but you know, and I want to be sure before father comes."

"You are right now," said Dorcas.

"Then we must pray that our sins may be forgiven. I've tried sometimes, but —"

Here the speaker's mind wandered, and it was more than an hour before he resumed the subject. Then he wished some one to pray, insisting upon this until his nurse told him that she could not pray.

"Can't pray!" he repeated, in a tone of astonishment. "Why, you're the woman that owns Black Jim, and you can't pray? It's the strangest thing! You must learn. Yes, you must, else there'll be no salvation for you. Send for Clifford. He can pray, and somebody *must* pray. Send for Clifford. He'll be glad to come and pray."

Mrs. Murray hesitated to ask Frank Clifford thus to expose himself to the dreaded fever; but there was no alternative. The young man came at once, glad to do so, and with pleasure

acceding to his friend's request. Brent was soothed by his prayer. Dorcas Armstrong was impressed, and but for the constant attention she was obliged to bestow upon her patient, her own neglect of religious duties would have made accusation against her.

The physician came late in the evening, and went away ominously silent. Mrs. Murray and Jennie could not sleep. Frank Clifford remained in the house, where he could be called at any moment; and yet Dorcas Armstrong preferred to keep her watch alone. If she ever prayed, it was then, as she cried, "God help me."

When the morning dawned, Brent was no worse, and she grew more hopeful. In the afternoon she was persuaded to leave him, while she obtained some much needed rest; and, sitting for a while with his mother, the latter said, "Oh, Miss Armstrong, how blessed it is that we can carry all our troubles to our heavenly Father, and be sure that he hears us and loves us!"

What could the woman say? She, who had

never experienced the blessedness of trusting an almighty Friend! How could she answer the remark to which she had listened! She did not answer. Making some excuse, she left the room abruptly, thinking that she, of all others, had need to learn the first great truths of religion.

The second night she watched with Brent Murray, his father returned; yet she did not yield her post. Mr. Murray looked at his son, noting the ravages which disease had made, and then turned away without being recognized. A little after, Brent unclosed his eyes, and murmured, "Yes, it's true; and I must tell father. Why don't he come?"

"He *has* come," replied Dorcas. "Do you want to see him?"

"Yes. I want to tell him that it's all true. I must tell him." But before Mr. Murray could return, his son had relapsed into unconsciousness.

"If he's no worse by midnight, there will be a chance for him," said the physician, when he came next morning. "Dorcas, can you keep up till then?"

"Yes," answered the kind-hearted woman, although her strength had already been severely tested.

"Then try and do it. Humor all his whims, and keep him as quiet as possible, and pray God that he will give us his life."

How many counted the hours, that pleasant spring day, wishing for the night, and yet fearing what the night would bring. Mr. Murray, who would have given his whole fortune to be assured of his boy's recovery, could only wait and hope.

Once during the afternoon Brent roused sufficiently to ask that some one would pray with him. "Clifford will," he whispered. "Where's father? Tell him."

Mr. Murray came in with Frank Clifford, and bowed his head upon his hands as the young man knelt. His boy might not be conscious of the request made, or the prayer offered; but he did not say this. Bending over the couch, he took Brent's fevered hand, and waited for some token of recognition.

"It's all true."

"What is true, my son?"

"True that we are sinners, and must ask God to forgive us for Christ's sake, or we shall come short of salvation. I've asked God to forgive me."

Here the labored words ceased. The speaker's strength was exhausted, and his nurse begged that nothing more might be said to him.

"He is no worse," she said, as she followed Mr. Murray into the hall. "It seems to me now that the chances are in his favor."

Midnight passed, and the patient slept, scarce daring to breathe, father, mother, and sister watched by his bedside. It might be that these were the last moments of his life. Dorcas Armstrong, sitting where she could see the face of the sleeper, did not once allow her gaze to wander. How long she waited!

At length a quivering of the eyelids, and a slight motion of the head, showed that the death-like slumber was over. It might be; yes, thank God! it might be that the stimulant, prepared in anticipation of this very

moment, would quicken the feeble pulse and strengthen the wasted frame. Skillfully administered at proper intervals, its effects realized the most sanguine expectations ; and when morning dawned, it was rumored that Brent Murray would live.

Of all the thanks lavished upon her whose unwearying care had, with God's help, contributed to this result, I need not write. The parents lacked words to utter their gratitude, while all that language could express, they said. Dorcas returned home, glad and happy, yet strangely troubled.

Was it all true ? Must forgiveness and salvation come to her through Christ ? She had intended to do right ; had improved the time and strength given her, and had helped those who needed help. But notwithstanding this intention and these good deeds, she had made some mistakes in her life. She was not so vain as to think herself perfect. All are sinners. She was no exception. She started from her sleep as the accusations of conscience sounded in her ears, and half wished that she

might nevermore hear of God or accountability. Brent Murray must have been delirious when he talked of such things.

Thus thought his father, who watched him, day after day, so pale, so still, and so silent. A wistful look would sometimes steal over his face, but no word betrayed an ungratified wish ; only as the door of his room opened, from time to time, he seemed to be expecting one who never came.

At length he said to his father, " I want to see Frank Clifford. I thought he would come to see me."

" He has been here every day, my son," was the reply.

" Then let him come to see me. I want him. I want him to pray with me. Father, the Bible *is* true, and religion is true. You have made a mistake ; but it's not too late. Old Elspeth told Harry about it, and there's time for the rest of us."

The boy was in his right mind now. His father could not doubt that, although he was very weak, and the effort he had made wearied

him painfully. "You'll tell Clifford, won't you?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Murray. "But I wish you wouldn't trouble yourself about anything until you are stronger. Things will seem very different to you then."

This man was distressed at the thought that his son might become what he was pleased to call "a religious fanatic." He wished Brent to have more liberal views, and yet possess the nobility and purity of character which distinguishes the most intelligent and consistent Christians. The present, however, was no time for controversy; and within an hour Frank Clifford entered his friend's room.

"I'm so glad!" said Brent. "I've wanted you. Can't you stay a while?"

"As long as you wish," was the cordial reply. "I'm at your service for the entire day; and I fancy I'm a tolerable nurse."

Mr. Murray went out, leaving them together; and when he returned, two hours later, his son was sleeping. He did not ask what had occurred; but when the sleeper awoke, he knew

some new happiness had gladdened one young heart.

"You're willing Clifford should stay with me every day, for an hour or two, an't you, father?" said the son.

"Yes, if you won't talk too much," was the response. "You know the doctor said you ought not to have company."

"But Clifford isn't company. He does me good."

Mrs. Murray knew how this good was done, and rejoiced in the belief that her boy was in sympathy with her, although she was forbidden to speak of anything pertaining to religion in his presence.

"When I get well we'll read the Bible together, and try to be Christians; and then, perhaps, father and Jennie will see how good it is." This was whispered, softly, to the mother, and thus was told the joyful news.

Brent Murray did not forget all this when returning strength enabled him to seek his own pleasure. His first visit was made to the parsonage, where, in a long conversation with Mr.

Stearns, he testified of what God had done for him. There, too, he learned that on the night when he passed the crisis of his disease, especial prayer had been made that his life might be spared, and henceforth devoted to the service of God.

"That was the night I heard Father Merrill praying for me," remarked the young man. "I remember that I used to think I should get well if he prayed for me. I heard him pray that my life might be spared, if it could be with a blessing."

"Those are the words he uses when praying for any one who is very sick," said Mr. Stearns, with some surprise. "I saw him that day, and he told me he was moved to pray earnestly for your life."



CHAPTER XVI.

CHANGES AMONG THE YOUNG PEOPLE.



LY fethers broken, the waters rippled, and danced, and sparkled in the glad sunshine. The valleys and the hills were covered with verdure. Flowers bloomed in sequestered nooks, where only fairy feet had trodden, and tiny bells drooped from fragile stems, which swayed with every passing breeze.

This spring was like all others,—a resurrection from the dead,—fit emblem of that glorious morning, when the corruptible shall put on incorruption, and souls shall be clad in the garments of immortality.

"God has made all things beautiful in their turn," said Father Merrill, as he stood on the brow of a hill, gazing down upon the picture

spread at his feet. "It seems to me I never realized that so much as I have this spring."

"I am sure that *I* never did," replied George Esty. "The grass is greener, and the skies fairer to me, than ever before."

"And God is over all, blessed forever," added the old man, reverently. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and give thanks for all his mercies, new every morning, and fresh every evening. Surely my cup runneth over. My last year's experience has been the best of my life. And yours, George, has not been all dark."

"No, sir," was answered; and yet a little sadly, as the speaker contrasted his present position with that he had occupied a twelve-month before.

"There is a silver lining to the cloud," Mr. Merrill made response. "Look just beyond that high peak, and see the light. From the hills cometh our salvation; and like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. It is a good thing to give thanks and rejoice."

"Yes, sir, it is," said his companion, catch-

ing something of his glad spirit. "I *am* thankful, and I *will* rejoice."

"That's right, my boy. I want you to be a happy Christian, singing as you go, and thus honoring Him who has bought you with a price. We must be diligent in business, serving the Lord."

Well might Father Merrill say, "My cup runneth over." During the past year souls had been given him, as seals of God's approbation. In basket and in store, also, he had been blessed. Mr. Goddard had paid the interest on every dollar due to him, which was, in itself, no inconsiderable sum; and already there were many who said the old man had been wiser than his counselors.

To Dell Goddard's eyes the new home was nearly as pleasant as the old; and even her father wondered how a place, which had been so long neglected, could in so short a time be made to wear such a different aspect.

"It has been done by diligent work," was the reply to a question asked in regard to this. "Steady work will accomplish almost anything

that it is right to do. I suppose you have found that out."

"Yes, sir, I have, thanks to you. I expected to do well last year; but I am astonished at all my success. It would have been presumption for me to expect so much. The rent of the mill is paid; the interest on my whole debt is paid; and if you had staid on your old place, I could have made a handsome payment on the principal."

"Give God the glory, my friend. If he had withheld his blessing you would have worked in vain. Perhaps you think my doctrines don't agree; but I've tried them both, and they're both according to the Bible and common sense."

Mr. Goddard would not express his opinion, lest it might provoke a discussion of unwelcome subjects, and, having business elsewhere, he excused himself, leaving Dell to spend the day with grandpa and grandma Merrill.

Not long after another little girl came to grandpa Merrill's, and Dell Goddard made the

acquaintance of Maggie Wyman. Then, as children will, they talked of their personal experiences and of their treasures. Maggie had more books, while Dell had more companions of her own age.

"I've got a new Bible," at length said Maggie. "Aunt Dorcas bought one for me and one for Henry, and next Sunday we're going to meeting."

"Don't you always go?" asked her companion.

"No," was the reply. "We never went only once. But I guess we shall go always now. Aunt Dorcas says we may, and we want to. Henry and I want to be like grandpa and grandma Merrill when we grow up. They read the Bible and pray. Do you?"

"I try," answered Dell, frankly, notwithstanding she was somewhat embarrassed by the question. "Ben and I read the Bible together."

"That's the way Henry and I do," responded Maggie, delighted with this coincidence. "And Sunday nights we recite verses

to grandpa Merrill. I like Sunday best of any day."

Dell also had a preference for this day; and she was sure Ben liked it, because he seemed so happy. "He was always just as good as he could be, but now he's ever so much better," said his sister, emphatically. "Father says everything goes right since Ben took hold of the plow."

Not many weeks after this Ben told Mr. Merrill that everything had gone right since he began to acknowledge his dependence upon God.

"Well, my boy, I knew you'd be blessed in doing your duty," was the reply. "You don't find it very hard work to thank God now."

"Oh, no sir! Why, I thank him without thinking."

"That's the way," said the old man. "That's the way to do. Your heart just runs over with gratitude, don't it?"

"Yes, sir; and sometimes I whistle, and sometimes I sing, and sometimes I kneel down and try to say in words what I feel; but it's

all the same to me. I'm so thankful, and so happy, I must do something."

"And, my boy, it's all the same thing to God, if I read my Bible right. You love God, Ben?"

"Yes, sir, I know I do, just as well as I know that I love you."

"Then you're a Christian."

"I don't know that certain, though I think a good deal about it. I haven't always done right; but it seems to me the wickedest thing I've ever done was not to think of God, and love him. I forgot him."

"You've asked his forgiveness for that, my boy?"

"Oh, yes, sir, many and many a time! And I do believe he has forgiven me. But, Father Merrill, I never saw my sins before me like a mountain, and I never was in such agony, as some people say we must be, before we can truly repent. I was just sorry for every wrong thing I had ever done, and I am sorry now. If I had murdered anybody, or stolen, or been a liar, or a swearer, it seems to me I

should have more to repent of, and I should feel a greater burden of guilt."

"Yes, you would. It stands to reason and revelation both, that you would. And if you'd refused to do your duty, when you knew it, as a good many older people have year after year, you'd had more to repent of. You can't repent of sins you've never committed."

"I don't see how I can," said Ben. "But some folks say we ought to feel that we are just as guilty in God's sight as though we had broken every one of the commandments. Now, I don't feel so. Sometimes I've prayed that I might feel so, *if I ought to*," added the young man, emphasizing the qualifying clause. "But lately I've just been happy and thankful, without troubling myself much about it. You see, I'm a happy, good-natured fellow, anyway," continued the speaker, with a smile. "I never was flaring up and getting mad like some boys. I always looked on the bright side, if there was one, and tried to make one if there wasn't any; and I don't see why I shouldn't now."

"You should, my boy. Being a Christian an't wearing sackcloth, and sitting in the ashes, and lamenting over our sins all the time. We ought to have true, godly sorrow for our sins; such kind of sorrow as makes us humble before God, and makes us try to do better in time to come. Another thing, Ben, being converted don't make us all alike. I don't suppose any two people ever had exactly the same experience. I've seen some in such agony under conviction of sin that it seemed as though they couldn't live, and I've seen others come into the kingdom joyfully, as I believe you have. So, my boy, you can whistle, and sing, and work, and pray, doing all to the glory of God, and magnifying his great and holy name by a well-ordered life. I'm sure you'll try to do your duty, and you won't be left long in doubt as to what that is, if you honestly seek to know. You can have great influence over your brothers and sisters."

"Yes, sir, I know I can," was the reply. "I think Dell loves God now, and she is very conscientious. She has worked steadily, but

now we can afford to send her to school. She won't go into that old mill again."

"And what of your going to school, Ben?"

"Oh! I shall go when the right time comes. When our debts are paid, and the old mill is bought back, I can think of myself. I've learned something last year if I have worked every day. I shall work with better courage now I've had this talk with you."

Brave, happy Ben Goddard! Why should he go mourning all his days because some trembling ones faint and falter where he sees no stumbling-blocks! With a lighter heart, and more joyous thanksgivings, he returned to his home and his duty.

Father Merrill was quite aware that some of his brothers and sisters in the church would have given different counsel, and while encouraging the young man to hope for God's forgiving grace, would have cautioned him against presumptuous confidence. They would have insisted upon a constant distrust of himself, and a constant sense of his guilt.

As if Christ had not made ample atonement

for the sins of all who lay their sins at his feet! As if he had not opened a fountain in which all who will may wash and be clean! Father Merrill's judgment was not to be questioned; yet some feared that he looked too much on the bright side. It should be said, however, that not one of these so honored their profession as the old man who rejoiced in the abounding riches there are in Christ Jesus. It was his only hope for a sinful world. "There is no salvation except through Christ," he had said again and again while talking with those who claimed that they needed no atoning sacrifice.

When Brent Murray rode over to see him, and told him of the resolution made long before, and strengthened by the discipline of sickness, he encouraged his visitor to persevere in the search for true wisdom. He did not use the same words, or express the same thoughts as those which had helped Ben Goddard. He recognized the fact that these two young men were differently constituted, and differently situated.

Brent would need to stand firm against open opposition. He must be rooted and grounded in an intelligent faith. He should be able, first, to prove that the Bible was true, and also that the doctrines he professed to believe were plainly taught in the inspired word. He must meet subtle reasonings and specious fallacies with strong, convincing arguments. If he would do good work for the Master, he must be well equipped for the service.

"Study for yourself," said Mr. Merrill. "I never had any such doubts as you've been brought up to have, and I an't book learnt. But you ought to be; and though I don't want to advise you against your father, it's right you should know what you ought to believe. But, my boy, you must study prayerfully. I've thought sometimes that God gives more wisdom in answer to prayer than is found in the books. I don't condemn books, though. I wish I'd known more of them; but when I was a boy it wan't expected. You're going to live in different times, and what would do for me won't do for you. I

prayed for your life with a blessing, and I have faith that the blessing will be given. You stood where you could look into the valley of the shadow of death."

"Yes, sir, and I wished to come back; I was not ready to go through. I heard you pray for me, and I thought God would grant your prayer. I want to do my duty, and I hope you will pray for me now."

"Yes, my boy, I will, and you must pray for yourself," was the reply.

"Yes, sir, I do that," he answered.

His high sense of honor prevented his speaking freely of his father's peculiar views, and consequently he could not talk of the obstacles in the way, as he otherwise would have done. Frank Clifford had his entire confidence in spiritual things, but even with this friend he could not discuss his relations with his father. He drove slowly home, taking counsel of himself and of God in regard to the future.

Mr. Murray was sitting upon the piazza when his son reached home, and, without

waiting for a change of purpose, the latter addressed his father respectfully, and asked for permission to act in all religious matters as his conscience dictated.

"I thought *you* had acted as you please," was the reply. "My wishes have not seemed to influence you." There was something of the old hard tone in this; but presently better thoughts prevailed, and the speaker added, "I have no wish to play the tyrant in my family. Act for yourself, but don't trouble me with your superstitions."

This was more than Brent had expected; and, careful not to annoy his father, he commenced a course of reading recommended by Mr. Stearns, in which he soon became deeply interested, and so far from the new order of things producing an estrangement between the clergyman and his wealthy neighbor, they were more friendly than before. There was a growing intimacy between the families. Mrs. Stearns and Mrs. Murray, whose health was much improved, exchanged frequent calls, and although the latter did not attend church, her

children reported the sermons, to which they listened with the closest attention.

Meanwhile, Brent Murray had changed. He was not the same that he had been before his sickness, and, as everybody said, the change in him was a great improvement. The servants in the house found him more thoughtful, and the workmen oftener received from him a pleasant word. With the young people he was a greater favorite, while among the old he made many new friends.

Mr. Butterworth was remembered and visited, in company with Frank Clifford, to whom the humble Christian expressed his "views on religion;" thankful for the encouraging words which were spoken in return, and quite lost in admiration of the young men who had taken the trouble to call upon "such a poor old creature." Industriously working to bring up his land, he strove with renewed energy whenever this was observed and mentioned, so that he was doubly benefited by every visit.

Dorcas Armstrong had come to expect frequent calls from these friends, and Black Jim

was never so much admired as when they discussed his fine points. But in none of their calls had Brent found opportunity to ask their hostess what she thought of religion.

At length, when it was nearly midsummer, he rode over alone, and some allusion having been made to their first meeting, he said, "You were the first person who ever made me think seriously of my faults. I don't believe I've ever been quite the same since then. You told me the truth in plain words."

"And no doubt you thought I was very impudent."

"I don't remember thinking that, but I do remember feeling very much ashamed of myself. You did your duty."

"Well, yes," she answered, laughing. "I'm pretty likely to do my duty, as far as talking's concerned, when I see a dumb beast abused. I'm glad you don't bear me any ill will for it."

"There is no reason why I should bear you ill will. You did me a great kindness then as well as since, and, Miss Armstrong, there's something I've been wishing to say to you for a long time. May I say it now?"

"Certain," was the laconic response.

"I want you to be a Christian." That was very little to say, very little compared with what Brent had purposed, yet it included all. "You won't bear me ill will for that," he added, after waiting long for a reply.

"No, I won't, Brent Murray. If 'twas in your mind to say it, you had a right to. But it an't likely we think alike about such things. If you're a Christian, I'm glad of it, really glad, and I hope you'll be a consistent one, like cousin Seth. If every professor had been like him, I might have been different. But it's too late now for me to change."

"Why is it too late?" asked her companion, quickly.

"Because I've made up my mind," she answered.

"Then you've thought it all over, and decided that it's best for you to have nothing to do with religion."

"Yes, I have — or — at least — I've decided."

These words were spoken with much hesi-

tation. She could not say, as she had before said, "I don't want religion." She dared not say this ; and, moreover, she was not sure that it was true. She was not satisfied with herself, not certain that she was living as she should live, and she was too honest to profess an indifference she did not feel.

"I'm only just beginning a Christian life, but I know you'll need religion when you come to die. I'm going to pray for you. Good by."

There was a striking contrast between this young man and the old man, who had spoken to her similar words, but their hearts were filled with the same Christian love, and their prayers ascended to the same throne of grace. She looked after Brent Murray as he rode away. She had watched Veezy Butterworth, as, with shambling steps, he turned from her door, and now as then her eyes were dim with tears.

She could never forget their solicitude ; but, perhaps, of all the influences brought to bear upon her, none was so potent as Mr. Stearns's

careful avoidance of any mention of religion in her presence. He, with his wife, visited her, counting her among their best friends, and often expressing their gratitude for her kindness, yet never a word of heaven or heavenly things. She could not misinterpret their silence if she would.

All around her a mighty change had been wrought. Every Sabbath morning she was left alone. Many passed her house on the way to church, some walking, and some in old wagons, which creaked and groaned beneath their burden, while every face was happy and expectant.

Old Mr. Butterworth always walked, starting early and stopping often to rest, sure to receive from Dorcas a nice lunch, to help him on his way.

"Thank ye," he would say. "Things is different from what they used to be. You're a good woman, Dorcas." And then the wistful look, more eloquent than any of his poor words.

The children talked of the communion Sab-

bath, when "ever so many were going to join the church." Without understanding all which this implied, they knew that the people professed to love God, and promised to serve him.

"There are two boys not so old as I am," said Henry.

"Do you wish *you* was going to join the church?" asked Maggie.

"I don't know," was the reply. "Perhaps I'm not good enough, but I mean to be good, and I know I love God."

"Perhaps there's something else they have to do," suggested the sister. "Anyway, you'd have to ask aunt Dorcas, and I don't believe she'd be willing you should join the church."

Dorcas Armstrong heard this, and went directly to Mr. Merrill's, there to tell cousin Seth that she wanted him to advise Henry in religious matters, the same as if the boy was his own son. "I won't have any responsibility about it," she said, after repeating what she had heard. "I don't know anything about it, and if you've any interest in that boy's soul,

I want you to look after him. I can't do it. If he wants to join the church, it's none of my business."

"There's no hurry about that," replied Mr. Merrill, quietly. "There are twenty to come forward next Sabbath."

"Is old Mr. Butterworth one?"

"Yes; and we're going to try and have his wife get out. Mother's been trying to hunt up a bonnet for her to wear."

"I'll find a bonnet and shawl for her," Dorcas responded, heartily. "I've got a black shawl that's been laying by this dozen years. She can have it and welcome. And I've got a bonnet I can fix up. Poor old woman! She ought to go decent. Is George Esty one of the twenty?"

"Yes; and if there ever was a living Christian he's one. Mother and me feels as though he belonged to us. We shan't know how to get along without him."

"Any danger of his going, right away?"

"Not as I know of. But I'm always expecting an opening for him. Perhaps you'd better

talk to mother about them things for Miss Butterworth before you go home."

As a result of this talk, Mrs. Butterworth was presented with a bonnet and shawl, which no old lady in town would have been ashamed to wear, and which she thought "most too good for such as her." Everything was arranged. She was to ride with Mrs. Merrill, while her husband would walk, as usual.

People who "*never* went to meeting," went that day, which was a high day in the history of our village church. There was a fine-looking stranger in "the minister's pew;" but few cared to observe him. All eyes were fixed upon "the candidates for admission to the church." Reverently they came forward, old and young together; some well endowed with this world's goods, and some struggling with poverty.

"A blessed season," as Father Merrill said to the stranger, who grasped him cordially by the hand.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "And it must be doubly blessed to you, whom God has per-

mitted to be the means of bringing these souls to him."

"Not unto us, not unto us; but unto God be the glory," responded the old man; adding, soon after, "We shall see you to-morrow."





CHAPTER XVII.

GEORGE ESTY'S RETURN TO THE CITY.

THE next morning George Esty went to his work as usual, although he had passed a sleepless night. Having seen and recognized Mr. Clapp, who had written so kindly of him to Mr. Stearns, he was excited by the mere proximity of one who knew so much of his previous life. Mr. Merrill had been to the parsonage Saturday evening, and must have seen the visitor, although his name had not been mentioned. A little past noon the clergyman drove over with his cousin; and not long after George was called to the house, where Mr. Clapp met him cordially.

As had been previously arranged, they were left alone, and business at once introduced.

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The merchant wanted a clerk in his store whom he could trust, under all circumstances. Disposed to offer the situation to his present companion, he wished to know the whole truth in regard to the young man's leaving Mr. Wallace. "You understand that this would be necessary," he remarked.

"Yes, sir, I do," was the reply. "And do you wish to know my story after I left?"

"I should be glad to know it," answered the merchant. "We shall be on more confidential terms then; and you may be sure I shall not use my knowledge to your disadvantage."

George Esty waited for a moment, the blush of shame mantling his cheeks. It was more difficult to talk to this man of his sin and his sufferings than it had been to unburden his heart to Father Merrill. But he gained courage for the effort, and as he proceeded, the consciousness of an unspoken sympathy greatly aided him. It was all told; and yet the listener could not realize how cold, and hunger, and remorse had tortured him who made such confession. He could not realize this;

but he could and did appreciate the firm purpose and manly uprightness which had striven, so earnestly, to redeem the past.

"You have shown the right spirit, and I honor you for it," said Mr. Clapp, extending his hand to his companion. "There is a place for you in my store, if you will accept it. I shall trust you, and others will trust you. I shouldn't do as Mr. Wallace did; but it may have been the best thing for you. Any of us may do wrong. Even the Christian often yields to temptation, and we all need to forgive, as we would be forgiven."

Some further conversation in regard to the service required, and salary to be paid, closed the interview. George Esty was to enter upon his new duties as soon as convenient for his present employer. Father Merrill congratulated both parties upon this arrangement; as also did his wife, although they were sorry to lose the young man from their family.

Dorcas Armstrong, who was first to be told the news, expressed herself in a characteristic manner. "It beats me!" she said. "If Dan

Mason had staid here George would likely froze to death in the old barn, or if he'd lived, he'd wandered on, nobody knows where. Now, who knows but what Ben Goddard failed, and you moved over here just to save his life! It's likely to me there's something more to come of it, though I don't know what. I'm sorry to have the young man go off. He could keep any school in town this winter, at his own price. I don't know what I'm going to do. There's Frank Clifford and Brent Murray going off to school in two or three weeks, and I shall miss them more than I want to. I guess we shall all be pretty lonesome."

"Yes, Dorcas, it's likely we shall. But we'll try and get along. You've got the children, and we've got all of you. You're a real comfort to us, and I an't going to be sorry that George can go where he wants to. I'm so glad he's a Christian, I can't be sorry for anything about him."

"I'm glad he's a Christian, too."

Dorcas was gone; and then it occurred to

Mrs. Merrill that this last remark was not what might have been expected from her.

"She *is* different," murmured the old lady. "I do believe she's glad George is a Christian, and she's glad for everybody that's converted."

It was soon known that Mr. Merrill's hired man was going to leave; and within a few days another was found, who thought he could do as much work as that city chap. But Betsy thought differently. "He won't do half as well," she said, with great emphasis. "George is always so polite, it takes off the hardest part of the work; and then he always thinks of everybody's comfort. For my part I hope I shall see him again some time."

She was not alone in hoping this. All his acquaintances expressed the same desire, and were assured, in return, that if he lived three years he should come back to make a visit. Even the stage driver was sorry to have him "leave these parts," and wished him the luck to get rich.

"If I ever do I'll remember you," was George Esty's reply. "But what do you call rich?"

"Well, if I was worth, say now, five thousand dollars, I should think I was about rich enough for me. You've been in the city before?"

"Yes, I was there about three years; and then it seemed best that I should leave for a while. Mr. Merrill wanted some help, and I wanted work, so we made a bargain. Now it seems best for me to go back to the city."

This was sufficiently explicit, if not altogether satisfactory, and the inquisitive driver asked no further questions. From him his passengers learned where he had taken up "the lame man, that never was seen nor heard of afterward;" and, as may be imagined, one heart beat quicker as they passed the spot.

There our hero had sat, despairing and forlorn; now he was hopeful, and counting many friends. The future opened before him brighter even than in the old days, ere he had stooped to sin. Humble before God, he was again confident before men. Mr. Clapp stood higher in the mercantile world than did his

former employer. Moreover he was to have a larger salary than he had ever received. Under ordinary circumstances, his temptations to extravagance and dissipation would be increased; but now leaning upon an almighty Arm, he trusted he should stand firm.

Not like a stranger was he greeted, as he went directly to his old boarding-place. Mrs. Hope was glad to see him. She had been counting the days since he wrote, asking to be reinstated in her family. His room, which had been vacated a short time before, was ready for him, and she never had a boarder she liked so well.

"But, Mr. Esty, you look so much better I should hardly know you," she said, after he was established in the old quarters. "You didn't tell me what you are going to do now you've come back."

"No, Mrs. Hope, I didn't; but I will tell you. I am going into Mr. Clapp's store."

"Into Mr. Clapp's store!" she repeated, in a tone of astonishment. "I didn't know but you'd go back to Mr. Wallace. I've heard he

has had a good deal of trouble to make your place good, and I couldn't help thinking it was a just judgment upon him. I never shall get over his treating you as he did."

"It was the best thing for me, Mrs. Hope. It drove me out of the city to where I found a good home and my Saviour."

"Do you mean to say that you are a Christian?" asked the woman.

"I hope I am, and I hope to live like a Christian," answered her companion.

"Then come right out before everybody and say so," was Mrs. Hope's advice, after a moment's thought. "Take a decided stand, and you'll do well enough. I used to think religion was all you lacked; and if you've got that, you won't have any more trouble. Mr. Clapp is one of the best kind of Christians. His head and heart were both converted. It an't for me to say that Mr. Wallace an't a Christian, but I will say that I've seen him when he didn't act like one. I'm glad you've come back, and I hope you'll show him that he made a mistake in sending you away."

Mr. Wallace manifested some surprise when he met George Esty in the street, and still more when he saw him in Mr. Clapp's store. He bowed coldly at the first meeting, more cordially at the second, and when the young man was sent to him to transact some business, his manner wanted nothing of respect. Of course the return of his old clerk revived the curiosity which had been felt when Esty left, but for once curiosity was baffled.

The young man's first calls had been made upon his creditors, whose bills he paid to the last cent. His former friends were loud in their expressions of welcome, congratulating him upon his "first-rate chance," and inviting him to join them in their accustomed places of resort.

"Old Wallace is a pretty hard customer, but Mr. Clapp is a gentleman, every inch of him," remarked one, whose face bore the marks of dissipation.

"Yes, a *Christian* gentleman," replied George Esty. "Mr. Wallace is just."

"Too confounded just," was the response.

"I'll tell you a piece of his justice. He hired a boy into his store to do errands, a little fellow, but bright and smart as he could be. Wallace didn't pay him enough to keep soul and body together anyway, and one day the boy saw some pennies on the table, and took two. Now comes the justice. The little fellow's conscience troubled him so he carried back the pennies, and told what he had done. What do you think Wallace did? Just turned him off; and when he begged for another trial, ordered him out of the store. That's justice for you with a vengeance! Webster told me of it, and we hunted up the boy and gave him a little help. His mother makes shirts for ten cents apiece, and he is honest if he did for once take two pennies that didn't belong to him. He said he wanted to buy some peaches for his mother. By George! Esty, I don't make any pretensions to being a Christian, but I am human, and I want to help that little fellow."

"Well, Nason, I make some pretensions to being a Christian, and I want to help him too."

"You a Christian, Esty? By George! It's something new, isn't it?"

"Yes, new to you. I certainly was not a Christian when I left the city. Now I am trying to live according to Bible rules."

"Well, go ahead, old fellow, and I'll see how you hold out, though you used to be tiptop company, and we shall be sorry to lose you."

"What's to hinder my being good company now?"

"I don't know. 'It's hard telling;' and the puzzled look upon the speaker's face provoked a smile from his companion. "To tell the truth, I don't know much about it. I suppose you would prefer a prayer meeting to a jolly time?"

"I should like both, provided there was nothing wrong in the jolly time," replied George Esty. "But tell me more of your boy. I am interested in him;" and there might have been added, truthfully, "I am interested in you."

His companion had changed much since they parted ten months before. A noble na-

ture would go to wreck, unless some one interposed to prevent the catastrophe. The two walked toward the wretched quarter where little Will Downs lived with his mother.

"Better take Will under your wing," said Nason, after some conversation upon other subjects. "His mother is one of the pious kind, and she'll consider you a safe guide for him."

"You ought to be a safe guide for him yourself," was the reply.

"But do you think I am?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

"Good for you, Esty. You can tell the truth, and that's more than everybody can do. I an't quite up to the mark, but then I'm about as good as the average, and I'm willing to take my chance with old Wallace any day. By George! What if one of his boys should steal a penny! Wonder if he'd think it a state's prison offense! Tell you what, Will Downs is a better Christian than he is."

Mrs. Downs rose to receive her visitors, and asked them to be seated. Her boy had gone

out to get shavings, but would be in directly. He didn't find much work. He was hoping for better times. It was very kind in Mr. Nason to remember him. The mother was saying something like this, when Will came whistling up the stairs, and sprang into the room with a shout.

"Hurrah, mother! I've earned ten cents, and I've got some shavings that *is* shavings." And that was the boy Mr. Wallace had dismissed!

One of the visitors knew well how to pity him; but it was not so much for him as for young Nason that George Esty had made this call. They remained only long enough to encourage both mother and son, and then went their way.

Nason was puzzled. He could not see that his companion had changed in appearance, as he told some of their mutual acquaintances when speaking of the fact that Esty professed to be a Christian. "It must be, though, that he has changed," was added, and they were not long in discovering wherein this change

consisted. Frank, cordial, and affable, when invited to join in questionable amusements the young Christian declined in such a way that his motives could not be misconstrued.

In some respects his first month with Mr. Clapp was one of trial, and it was a relief to him when told that he had given entire satisfaction. At the same time he was able to speak a kind word for Will Downs, and not long after the boy found himself earning so much money, that he was positively rich. Two whom Mr. Wallace had discarded were taken into the confidence of his brother merchant, a man whose general shrewdness and knowledge of character was never questioned. If the former thought of this, however, he gave no sign; and if he doubted the justice of his mandates, he did not allow it to be known.



CHAPTER XVIII.

DORCAS ARMSTRONG'S EXPERIENCE.

FATHER MERRILL had wished to be informed how George Esty was met by his late employer, and when a single paragraph contained all there was to be told, the old man was half inclined to doubt the religion of one so hard-hearted. "He'll live to want the boy's help yet," was his comment.

"I hope he will," said Dorcas Armstrong, to whom this remark was repeated. "He's worse than I am, and I don't make any pretensions to being good."

"I an't sure about that," answered Mrs. Merrill. "Seems to me I've heard you say you meant to do right."

"I guess you have, and I do mean to do

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about right; but there's a difference. Professors pretend they're going to follow the example of Christ."

"Yes, and they ought to, just as much as you."

"I should think they ought to a good deal more," replied Dorcas, with some astonishment. "Don't you think you're under more obligations to live a good life than I be?"

"I don't know as I be, cousin Dorcas. I an't quite clear about that. Perhaps we'd better ask father;" and as father came in, the question was submitted to him.

After considering the subject, he said, "Supposing I had four children that I loved and took care of, and all I asked of them was that they should obey me. And supposing I couldn't make any mistakes about what was best for them. Now don't you think they ought to show some respect for me, and try to do as I wanted to have them?"

"To be sure I do," answered Dorcas, quickly.

"Well, then, supposing two of my children

should say, 'Father, we love you, and we'll try to do as you want to have us,' while the others didn't mind anything about me, anyway, though they were dependent upon me all the time. Now do you see any reason why the first two would be under any more obligation to obey me than the others?"

"No, I can't say as I do." This time the reply was made with more hesitation.

"Well, Dorcas, it seems to me that's about the way with them that profess to be Christians, and them that don't. We're all God's children, dependent upon him for our very lives, and we can't do anything for ourselves without his help. I know there's more expected of professors, but in God's sight I can't see how they're under any more obligation to do right than other folks. God makes allowance for sins of ignorance, but where anybody knows what duty is, and refuses to do it, their condemnation is just."

"But, cousin Seth, supposing they an't certain."

"Then they must pray over it till the way's

made clear. We an't required to walk in more light than we can get, but we are required to get all the light we can. An't that reasonable, Dorcas?"

"I don't know," she answered, slowly. "Yes, I do know," she added. "It is reasonable. I should say so about anything else, and I an't going to lie about this. But there! It does seem to me lately that I can't have no peace of my life. It's nothing but the Bible, and religion, and going to meeting, all the time. Sundays come so thick there an't much between. If my father'd been like you, cousin Seth, I should been different; but now, I an't going to say any more about these things, anyway."

What Mr. and Mrs. Merrill thought of her does not matter, while what she thought of herself was of infinite importance. She knew her duty, and refused to do it. As she walked slowly home she reviewed the events of the past year. Even she could see God's hand in all. Only the night before she had heard Maggie pray that she might be a

Christian, and she doubted not that this prayer was one of many.

She thought of cousin Seth's parable. She was an undutiful, disobedient child, and yet the Father showered his blessings down upon her. Like others, she was dependent upon God for life, and breath, and all things.

Days and weeks went by. She gathered in her harvest, and counted her gains. The evenings were longer, and the neighbors talked of having a prayer meeting. "I do wish they wouldn't," she said to herself; yet no one heard her express wish or opinion in regard to it.

At the first meeting, Mr. Butterworth asked that everybody would pray for the conversion of "one of the best and smartest women in town." He did not designate this woman by name, and, indeed, it was not necessary that he should. All knew to whom he referred, and all prayed that Dorcas Armstrong might be converted.

At home she felt the influence of these prayers. They reached to heaven, and the

Holy Spirit moved upon her heart until she saw herself so sinful and so guilty that she was fain to hide herself from the presence of the Lord. Pride and prejudice were forgotten; her father was forgotten; she had to do only with Him who ruleth in the skies. Her many assertions of independence and indifference seemed blazoned in letters of living light, and she trembled as she looked. Her boasted goodness was mere selfishness. What merit had she to plead as a reason why condemnation should not be pronounced upon her?

Suddenly came to her the thought, "It is too late for me to change." Too late! Had she not said this herself, and was it not true? Too late! Shut off from hope! Shut out from heaven! In his abounding charity Father Merrill might find some excuse for her conduct. She could find none, though she sought it with tears.

That night it was impossible for her to sleep, and the next day she seemed so ill that Maggie told grandma Merrill something must be the matter. "Aunt Dorcas didn't know I

was going to tell you," added the child, "but I wish you'd come over."

Mr. Merrill having some business to transact with his cousin, went to her house, and remarking her unusual depression of manner, asked the cause.

"Nothing, only I've just found out that I'm a sinner, and it's too late for me to be forgiven. Now I've told you the whole truth, but you needn't say a word to me. I suppose I can bear it, as I have everything else in my life." Having said this the speaker began to weep.

"Cousin Dorcas, this is the best news I ever heard of you," replied Father Merrill, his own eyes dewy, and his voice full of tenderness. "If you feel that you're a sinner, God is ready to forgive you. Don't tell me it's too late. Christ came into the world to save sinners like you and me. Cousin Dorcas, I've prayed for this hour. I had faith to believe the Lord would call after you. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be washed away in the blood of Christ."

"No, cousin Seth, I don't believe it; I can't believe it. Think what I've said and done."

"And are you sorry, Dorcas?"

"Sorry!" she repeated, looking at him almost fiercely. "Don't you suppose I'm sorry?"

"Yes, Dorcas, I'm sure you be. I knew you would be as soon as you came to realize the truth. You won't say any more against religion."

"No, and I han't said anything against it for a good while. I'm glad to have everybody get religion that can, but it's too late for me."

"No, cousin Dorcas, it is not too late." And then remembering that she must have heard much of the unpardonable sin during her father's life, Mr. Merrill hastened to add, "God's mercy is limited only by the sinner's willingness to accept mercy in the appointed way. God is able, and willing, and glad to receive all who come to him trusting in the merits of Christ. By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified, but whosoever believeth on Christ shall have everlasting life. So, Dorcas, it depends upon yourself whether your sins are forgiven or not."

"But if I'm one of them elected to be lost —"

"Don't finish that, Dorcas ; I don't want to hear it. What do you or I know about that ? We know that Christ died for all, and that's enough."

The good man knew whence came the thought his companion had but half expressed, and pitied her the more for another's fault. She looked at him so earnestly that he said, "What is it ? What do you wish to ask ?"

"I want to know what I shall do," she sobbed.

"Pray God to forgive your sins, and give you an assurance of forgiveness."

"But I don't know how to pray. I never prayed ; I *can't* pray."

"You *can* pray, cousin Dorcas. You can ask me for a favor if you want one, and you can ask God. If you don't want to pray, that's another thing. But you *must* pray or you will never be forgiven. I have prayed for you, and others have prayed for you. Now you must pray for yourself. God waits to be gracious. Put your trust in him, nothing doubting."

This was Father Merrill's parting injunction, and Dorcas Armstrong was left to commune with her own thoughts until afternoon, when cousin Mary was warmly welcomed. Then the proud woman revealed more of her recent experience than she had done in the morning.

"It all come over me as I was sitting here alone last night," she said. "I saw my sins clear as though they'd been written out before me, and they've been growing darker ever since. I can't live so, cousin Mary. I've known this good while that I wan't doing right, but I wouldn't give up."

"Are you willing to give up now, Dorcas ?"

"I don't know," was the hesitating reply.

"Are you willing to pray for forgiveness and strength to do your duty ?"

"I *can't* pray," she answered ; and for days she assured herself and these friends that prayer was, for her, an impossibility. At length, tired, worn, and despairing, she threw herself upon her knees, and prayed God to

give her strength and forgiveness. "Forgive me, and help me." This was the burden of her petition, and for the time she was comforted.

Then came a struggle between pride and duty. If she wished to be on the Lord's side, she must manifest this to the world. Here she faltered. She utterly refused Mrs. Merrill's invitation to attend the prayer meeting; yet all day she was haunted with a dread of the evening; and when left alone her agonizing convictions of guilt returned. With no definite purpose, she went out beneath the stars, and, as if moved by an irresistible impulse, her steps turned to the place of prayer. Unobserved she entered the house and gained a position where she could hear all which was said. Mr. Butterworth repeated his request of the previous week, and she knew for whom they prayed, as one after another presented her interests at the throne of grace, while it required a mighty effort of will to keep silence under the conflicting emotions which tortured her.

What right had these neighbors thus to talk of her, as though she was exposed to some imminent danger from which only an almighty Arm could save her? But was she not thus exposed, and did not her whole nature shrink from the danger which threatened her?

The hymns which were sung had been to her as household words in her girlhood. She had sung them many a time with those whose voices were now hushed in death, and she had hummed them at her work until even these were discarded as savoring too much of religion.

How she reached home that night she did not know, but she was in her own room when the children returned. The next day she went over to visit Mrs. Merrill, and while concealing the fact that she had attended the prayer meeting, acknowledged that she was more wretched than ever before. "I've tried to pray, and it seems to me I've done all I can," she said.

"Have you done everything you knew to be your duty?" asked her cousin.

"No, I han't," was the honest reply.

"Then that's the trouble, Dorcas. You can't expect God to give you an assurance of forgiveness as long as you willfully disobey him."

"Tell me what I ought to do," cried the unhappy woman.

"You don't need to be told," was the reply.

"You know what duty you have neglected. You an't ignorant, like some others, so you've no excuse to make. When you're ready to submit your will to God's will your trouble will be all over. If you deny Christ before men, he will deny you before his Father which is in heaven. Father and me have done all we can for you."

When with her cousin, Dorcas Armstrong had felt that she was nearer to God; but as she heard this her heart sunk within her. She must go home, and there settle the matter for herself. She wished to be at peace with God, but, like many another, she would dictate the terms of this peace.

In some way she went through the work of the week, too proud to acknowledge to her

family the cause of her unhappiness, and yet unable to conceal it. Sabbath morning dawned pleasantly. When all was still, she sat down with an open Bible before her, and determined that this day should decide her future. "For God, or against him!" Her weal or woe through all the countless ages of eternity depended upon her decision.

I should not say that light dawned upon her, but rather that she turned to the light; and when seated at the table with Hiram and the children, she told them she should use her whole influence to advance the cause of religion, whether she was a Christian or not. "We must have somebody pray for God's blessing upon us morning and night."

It seemed to those who looked at her as she said this, that her face was transfigured; and when, with clasped hands and bowed head, she thanked God for the food now prepared for them, her emotion found a response in the hearts of her companions. Maggie left her seat, and throwing her arms around aunt Dorcas's neck, wept for very joy; Henry was

ready to do the same; and Hiram, wiping the tears from his eyes, said, "That's the best job you ever done. I've been holding back, but I'm ready to go on now."

It was late when the children went to grandpa Merrill's; and then such a wonderful story as they had to relate! Aunt Dorcas had prayed at the table, and she was going to pray with them every night and morning! She said she would, and they were all so happy — Hiram and all. She could hear them recite their verses too, and everything was going to be so different. "I guess she'll come to the prayer meeting," whispered Maggie.

And surely, next Tuesday evening she was one of those who went to spend an hour in conference and prayer! After Father Merrill had opened the meeting, and invited all to take a part, Dorcas was first to rise and speak a few earnest words. She confessed that she had been wrong in the past; and while she did not now claim to be a Christian, she would no longer stand in the way of others. Spoken like herself, as must needs be, no one doubted her sincerity.

Old Veezy Butterworth leaned forward in his chair, and almost held his breath while she was speaking. "'Twan't no use my tryin' to talk after hearin' you," he said to her when the meeting had closed. "It done me more good than all the preachin' I ever heard. It 'll do mother a heap o' good just to hear on't."

The good news spread, and was confirmed beyond the possibility of a doubt when Dorcas Armstrong took her seat in the family pew the next Sabbath morning. People were surprised to see her, while she was surprised at what she heard. It had been twenty-five years since she had heard a sermon from that pulpit. She was a young girl then; a middle-aged woman now; yet her heart was far younger than it had been, when, forced by the command of her father, she had last entered this house.

People who knew her best said least to her. Even the clergyman's wife gave her only such greeting as was given to others, but during the week there was an opportunity for a frank interchange of feeling. Mr. Stearns and his

wife visited her, and she was glad to tell them of her experience. She was by no means sure that she was a Christian. Indeed, she had thought of herself and her sins until she was glad to forget self and sins together, as she confessed that she had done.

"It an't much consequence about me," she said, in all sincerity. "I don't deserve forgiveness anyway; but I mean to help others along. It's a wonder to me how I've changed. Why, Mr. Stearns, I just hated the sight of the Bible, but now I love to read it; and 'twas a real treat to me to hear you preach Sunday. It seems as though I'd got some new eyes, and new feelings about everything. And it's all come about so strange, too. 'Twas the best thing ever happened to me when Ben Goddard failed, and the best sermon ever preached in this town cousin Seth preached when he gave up his place. He might kept it, and most folks called him honest; but if he had there'd never been a prayer meeting out here, and I should lived on in my sins. Now he's been prospered, and Ben Goddard's

been prospered, and George Esty's found a good friend, and I've come to my senses." She was like a very child in her gladness, and her visitors could but smile as she enumerated the blessings which had resulted from Mr. Merrill's uprightness.

These were not all. New surroundings had impressed Mrs. Murray with more earnest convictions of duty, and enabled her to live as one who must give account to God rather than to man. Brent was an active Christian, and while maintaining an honorable position as a scholar, so conducting himself upon all occasions that even his father was forced to acknowledge there was no cause for anxiety on his behalf. Frequent letters from him cheered his mother, and encouraged her to hope for the time when the members of her family would rejoice in a common faith and a common Saviour.

During the winter vacation he, with his sister, was at home, happier far than they had been the previous year. Frank Clifford was at the parsonage, and the vacation was only

too short for all they wished to accomplish. There were visits to be made, meetings to be attended, and some books to be enjoyed together.

Dorcas Armstrong invited them to dinner, when she took occasion to thank Brent for having spoken to her of her neglected duty. "I remembered your words," she said. "I knew you really wanted me to be a Christian. It seemed to me that everybody was thinking about religion, whether they talked about it or not. I was all hemmed in by Christians, and now I'm trying to go along with them. The children, too, are trying to walk in the path to heaven. I wish you'd both be ministers. I'd make a minister of Henry, if he had a turn that way; but he'd rather make houses than do most anything else."

This led to some inquiries, and it was found that the boy had a decided taste for architectural drawing.

"You can be just as good a Christian without being a minister," remarked Frank Clifford, in response to a question asked by Henry

Wyman. "I choose to be a minister; but that is no reason why you should. With advantages, you might make something of your talent for drawing."

"He can have the advantages," said Dorcas Armstrong. "I've nobody to do for but these children. My sister and her children are dead, and I don't think I shall look after her husband. I thought one while I could take care of cousin Seth and his wife; but they don't need much of my help. We'll see about Henry next fall. The master said something about his drawing last winter; but so many things happened, I most forgot about it."

To Henry Wyman next fall seemed far off in the future; but the months succeeded each other so rapidly, each bringing its own work and its own pleasures, that he was hardly prepared for it when it came.

As Mr. Stearns had advised, he entered a school where drawing was made a speciality, and yet where the ordinary branches of study received proper attention.

"Seems as though all the boys were going

to school except Ben Goddard," said mother Merrill, a little sadly. "I feel bad about him. For my part I'd rather he'd take the interest money and go to school with it."

"So had I, mother. But he won't hear to it," was the reply. "He says there's time enough. He an't quite nineteen yet, and I guess, if the truth was known, he's studied a good deal the last two years and a half. They're making money fast, and perhaps another year he'll be willing to let somebody else do the coloring."

The young man thought it possible that he might do this. He was very anxious to commence a regular course of study; but above all things was he anxious that his father's debts should be paid.

In this instance the son had influenced the father more than the father had influenced the son, not only as regarded business, but also where moral and spiritual interests were concerned. The consistent conduct, the regular attendance upon the ordinances of religion, and the occasional word of appeal were not lost upon him.

Mr. Goddard was learning that godliness is no hinderance to worldly prosperity; that he who honors God most devoutly will labor most faithfully; and he who looks forward to a reward, enduring as eternity, has a more powerful incentive to action than he whose expectations are bounded by the narrow limits of this life.





CHAPTER XIX.

THE BLESSING THAT MAKETH RICH.

IN the history of a family or a community the most important events are sometimes crowded into a narrow space of time, leaving the coming months or years to be marked by few striking incidents. So was it in the community of which I write.

All had been moved by a common regret when Father Merrill left his old home, and all felt the deepest interest in his welfare and that of his wife. To use Dorcas Armstrong's words, "there was something happening all the time for two years," and then the current of events flowed on smoothly.

Mr. Merrill no longer considered himself poor; he was "getting forehanded," as the

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neighbors said, while he was richer in friends than ever before. By many who might never have known him, had not his fortune been as it was, he was quoted as an example of holy living.

George Esty, far away, surrounded by the hum and bustle of business, never forgot the dear old people who had taken him to their home and heart. Next to his parents, he loved and honored them, hoping for the time when he might in some way repay their kindness.

Not once had he faltered in his Christian course, not once betrayed the trust reposed in him. In a visit to his home he had reviewed all the past, and been reinstated in the confidence of his mother. A certain part of his salary was devoted to his family, and as this was increased from year to year, his boyhood's dreams tended to their fulfillment.

On the third anniversary of his return to the city he stood again by the side of Father Merrill. Much changed he was, yet the same in his frank manliness and generous affection.

"It has been well with you," said the old

man, closely scanning his face. "You are older and wiser than when we parted; but the world has gone well with you. Ah! George, your coming now is different from your other coming."

"Yes, sir," answered the visitor, in a husky voice. "God has blessed me, and I am happy to know that he has blessed you."

"Yes, my boy, God has blessed us, as he blesses those who put their trust in him. His promises are sure. In him is no variableness nor shadow of turning."

"But, Father Merrill, I have heard people say that Christians fare the hardest in this world."

"So have I, and it has been said so often that a great many people believe it. Thank God, in our country and in these days it can't be true. To be real live Christians is just to make the best of all the faculties God has given us. Folks ought to read the Bible and pray; but if they do that without plowing or sowing, they won't have any harvest. The best farmer will have the best crops, whether

he's a Christian or not. It's likely you've heard me talk this way before now; but, as our minister says, other things equal, the Christian stands the best chance in the world. There's old Veezy Butterworth now. You must go out and see him while you're here. Getting religion has made him all over. He works every day regular as a clock, and he'll come out a little ahead this year. All along this road the farms have improved since the owners became Christians. That's the way 'tis here. Now, how is it in the city? If a young man wanted to get business there, would it be anything against him if he had the name of being an active, consistent Christian?"

"No, indeed, it would not," answered George Esty, emphatically. "It would be the best recommendation he could have, so far as his character was concerned. But, then, you must admit that Christians are often severely afflicted. Your children all died, while your neighbor, perhaps making no pretension to being a Christian, missed not one from his family."

"True, George. But such sorrows come, sooner or later, to many,—those who love God, and those who love him not. Why, I can not tell. I only know that God does all things well. He never explains his dealings, yet it may be that I needed the discipline to make me a better Christian. God may have had work for me to do outside my own family. If my children had lived to settle around me, and have families of their own, my heart might all been bound up in them, so I should forget others. Now I'm father and grandfather to so many, I couldn't be very selfish if I tried. Don't think, though, that I didn't love my children, for I did. 'Twas hard, to be reconciled to losing them all; but 'twas so much harder for mother, I most forgot myself trying to comfort her."

Here the old man paused to wipe the tears from his eyes; but loyalty to his Master moved him to add, "Even if it was true now, as it was in the days of Paul, that so far as worldly things are concerned, Christians are of all men most miserable, it would still be the hight of

folly to sacrifice eternity for time. But we don't make sacrifices, George. What have I ever done? When God lays his hand heavy upon his creatures, what difference does it make if they rebel against him, and even curse him? They are in his power all the same. Christians are no more dependent upon him than others. Another thing: when Christians forget their duty, God sometimes draws them back to himself by discipline. When the idols of their hearts are broken, they turn to him for comfort."

"Yes, sir; I don't doubt it. I don't expect to fail of being a prosperous merchant because I try to live a Christian life; but it always makes me stronger to hear you express your faith in religion. I've often wished you could talk for me when I've been called upon to defend our common faith."

"I han't any time to do your work," said Father Merrill, with a smile. "We all of us ought to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us; but a consistent Christian life is the strongest argument in favor of religion."

Look round here, in some of the old houses, and you'll find them ready made. There's cousin Dorcas, now, just about the happiest woman you ever see, and to my mind, next to mother, just about the best. She leads her family in prayer, night and morning; and there an't a Sunday but what she's in her place in the meeting-house. 'Twas a good while before she really made up her mind that she was a Christian; but when she did, she come right forward and joined the church. But there, George, I don't know when to stop talking with you. Mother 'll think I'm going to keep you all to myself; and you'd better go in and see her while I look after my work."

Mrs. Merrill talked less to their visitor than did her husband. She preferred to listen, speaking only to express her pleasure in what she heard, or ask a question. She was interested in everything pertaining to George Esty's success.

"I'm so glad you've been prospered," she said, at length. "There han't been a day since I first see you but what I've prayed that you might prosper."

"And not one day but you have done me good," was the reply. "If it is ever in my power to repay you for some of your kindness, I shall consider myself fortunate."

"You've more than paid us, George. It's a good deal for old folks, like father and me, to have somebody to think of us. We've got a pretty large family, and they're all good children. Why, you don't know, George, how near they seem to us!"

"Well, mother, it's a blessed thing for them; but it seems to me the benefit is nearly all on one side. You give to us, while we give you nothing in return."

"Why, George, how can you say that, after bringing me such a handsome shawl? I really believe if father and me was poor as Miss Simpson, we should have everything we needed brought to us."

"I really think you would," said the young man, laughing at the idea of poverty with such assurance of possession. "In that case I might do something to express my gratitude."

"Well, George, I'm glad we don't need that kind of help. But if you think we've done anything for you, you do for somebody else. If you ever see a poor boy in trouble because he's done wrong, help him do better, if he will, for father's sake and mine."

George Esty had been mindful of this already, and could have rejoiced the heart of his friend by a recital of his efforts in behalf of others. Occasionally, during his visit, he spoke of some tempted ones to whom he had given a helping hand, but the half was not told. The visit was too short to satisfy his old friends, yet the time was so well improved that he saw most of the places and people whom he held in special remembrance.

One day he spent at the parsonage, where he learned more of Mr. Merrill's prospects than he had before heard. Mr. Goddard had so far retrieved his fortune, that there was no doubt of his being able to cancel his entire indebtedness.

"I understand that Mr. Cofran is willing to retain the mill in his possession until such

time as Mr. Goddard can redeem it, at its appraised value, when it changed owners," said the clergyman in the course of conversation. "Ben Goddard, the son, who has really been at the head of business, is away at school, and he wouldn't have gone if he hadn't been sure that Father Merrill would be paid. If the old place was for sale, I've no doubt Mr. Goddard would buy it, even at an advanced price."

"Is there any prospect of its being for sale?" asked George Esty.

"I don't know that there is," was the reply. "But Mrs. Murray's health is much improved, and her husband is away on business a large part of the time. It may be that he would sell. He is no farmer; neither is his son; and it's not easy to hire a man who will carry on such a place to advantage."

"You would be glad to have your old neighbors back."

"Yes, I should; although we are strongly attached to Mr. Murray's family. He is a noble, generous-hearted man, and I am indebted to him for many favors."

"Has he changed his views upon religious matters?"

"I don't know that his views have changed. I know, however, that he objected to his son's making a public profession of religion, and after a year withdrew his objections. Mrs. Murray and Brent united with the church at the same time. He was not present on the occasion; but I have faith that he will yet see the truth. Brent is doing finely, and his father is very proud of him. He and Frank Clifford entered college together, and I have no doubt they will graduate with honor."

"And will they study a profession together?"

"I suppose not. Frank is to study theology. Brent thought for a while that he must be a preacher; but after much consideration he decided to study law, as he had intended before he had any interest in religion, and as his father was very anxious he should do. I think Frank advised him to this, and I was very glad that he did so. Mr. Murray's wishes should be considered. I have reason

to know that he was very much gratified with Brent's decision."

He was, indeed; and the manner in which his son announced this decision did much to soften his prejudice against religion. "With my present feelings, were no one else concerned, I should prefer to study theology," said Brent. "But I am glad to defer to your wishes; so I shall strive to be a first-class lawyer, and gratify your ambition."

"Have you no ambition yourself?" asked Mr. Murray.

"Indeed I have," was the reply. "I am as anxious to make my mark in the world as you can be to have me; and I hope to do as much good, in my way, as I could if I were a clergyman."

"Then you would be a clergyman after all, if you considered only your own preferences?"

"Yes, sir; I think I should."

"Then, perhaps, I ought not to have said anything against it. But, my son, it would be very hard for me to give up my long-cherished hopes for you. I have given up a great deal

already, and it seems to me sometimes that you are all drifting away from me. Yet, if I have been wrong, I am glad you have found the right."

"Thank you a thousand times for saying that, father," exclaimed Brent. "I know you are wrong. I am as certain of that as I am that the sun shines in the heavens. I hope I have not seemed undutiful to you since I professed to be a Christian."

"You have not, my son. You have given me no cause for anxiety. But it is a constant wonder to me that one like you should become a convert to a religion so narrow and limited in its range."

"Oh, father! it is not limited; it is boundless as God's immensity, reaching from the beginning of all things to the very outermost verge of eternity. And, father, my faith in what you call a narrow religion is all that has saved me, even for this world. I could never be such a man as you are, — honest, upright, and honorable, — while ignoring my accountability to God. It is not in my nature. I

need just the restraining influence which I now feel, and which I trust will keep me ever near to God. You have reason to be thankful that I am a Christian."

Mr. Murray looked at his son admiringly. If he could take away this living, breathing, inspiriting faith, what could he give in return? To his honor be it said, that henceforth he had no wish to make his son other than he was. If his family were drifting from him, they surely were not going downward, as he mentally acknowledged, whenever he looked at the happy face of his wife, and noted how her higher and better nature had developed since her feet rested upon a sure foundation.

In the deepest sympathies of his family he had no part, yet were not his home comforts abridged. Never had wife or children given him truer love, and never were they dearer to his heart. Jennie had made no public profession of religion, yet it was apparent to all who knew her that she was actuated by Christian principles. A general favorite, and a really beautiful girl, she was especially dear to her

parents, while she was the pet and pride of her brother.

The time had long passed when Mrs. Merrill considered it a trial to enter her old home. She was now often there in the pleasant west room, a welcome and honored guest, talking of all the mercies which had crowned her days, and rejoicing in the prosperity of others. She had no regrets to waste upon what had seemed to her afflictions. She was fully repaid for all sacrifices. Mrs. Murray clung to her as to a mother, while the young people were glad to sit at her feet, and learn of her wisdom.

Ben Goddard had often said he should never be quite as happy as he wished to be until Mr. and Mrs. Merrill were established in their rightful place, but the old people themselves found their present home one of comfort, and Dorcas Armstrong had been heard to say she hoped Mr. Murray would never sell at any price.

She "couldn't get along without cousin Seth and his wife for neighbors." Henry was away at school much of the time, and his chosen

employment would soon take him from home altogether. Maggie, too, must be educated and how could Dorcas live alone? The idea was not to be entertained. If Ben Goddard ever paid his debt, — and she could not but hope that he would, — cousin Seth could stay where he was, and "be well enough off." His income was sufficient "for all reasonable expenses, and for charity." Thus she reasoned, and sometimes she thought so anxiously of this that she expressed her thoughts to others.

"You should kept them children to work, and then you'd had somebody to live with you," suggested a neighbor. "I wonder at you, Dorcas, to spend so much money on them, when they an't nothing to you."

"An't nothing to me!" repeated the woman thus addressed. "They're just my children, that's all. The Lord gave them to me, and I mean to do my duty by them. I've lived alone, and I suppose I could again, though I don't want to. But, anyway, the children shall go to school, and be all they can in the world. Henry would staid and worked on the farm

if I'd asked him to, but I wouldn't. As long as he's a Christian, it don't make much difference what he does. He'll try to live consistent anywhere, and Maggie shan't be ashamed of her ignorance, as I am of mine, if she'll make good use of her advantages. They're just as welcome to the money I spend for them as the minister is to what I give him."

This was all she could say, for every one knew it was a real pleasure to her to give to Mr. Stearns and his family. She had a plan for educating one of his boys, and already a fund was accumulating for that purpose. To the clergyman and his wife she went for advice in regard to her children, as she always called Maggie and Henry Wyman. The piano, which found its way into the old sitting-room, and over which Maggie cried for joy, was purchased by Mr. Stearns during a visit to the city. A great piece of extravagance many called it; but Dorcas Armstrong had earned her money, and no one could prevent her spending it as she pleased.



CHAPTER XX.

A SUDDEN DEATH.

THE visit of George Esty was a great event in the quiet neighborhood, and the interest attendant upon it had hardly subsided, when the whole town was excited by rumors of a railroad disaster, of which Mr. Murray was one of the victims. Henry Wyman heard of it late in the evening, and rode at once to the village to ascertain the truth.

At the parsonage he learned all that was certainly known. Mr. Murray had been injured, and his family had received a dispatch to that effect. Mrs. Murray and her daughter had left home with Mr. Stearns, and would reach him at the earliest possible moment.

The next evening Mrs. Stearns heard

from her husband. There was no hope for the wounded man : he must die. His family were with him, and he was fully conscious of his condition.

This news was received at the hour appointed for the weekly prayer meeting, and Father Merrill, who conducted the meeting, desired that the time might be spent in prayer for the conversion of the dying man. There was only a little band of brothers and sisters, and he requested that every voice might be heard. The request met with a hearty response. For more than two hours these Christians prayed, as one prays for the life nearest and dearest, until they felt the assurance that a blessing would be granted.

And how was it in the room where lay the man who, all his life, had trusted to his own wisdom and his own strength? Suffering, struggling for the breath which grew shorter and shorter, he lay with the death damp on his brow. He had been able to converse with his family, assuring them of his love, and advising them in regard to the future, but now he was fast nearing eternity.

There was another by his bedside — an old woman, who watched his every motion, and administered to every want. She had been there before wife or child, doing all that could be done to alleviate his sufferings. He was one for whom she had prayed through long years, and to whom she was much indebted. Mr. Murray was on his way to see her when the accident occurred, almost at her home ; and, having been summoned to his aid, she was first to reach him, first to hear his lamentations for a misspent life.

Elsbeth Bawn had expected that he would one day bewail his sin, but not thus did she expect it would come. Not thus would she have chosen. But she did not falter in her duty. She remembered the beautiful boy who had called him father, and whose eyes she had closed, and looking up for strength, she endeavored to point him to the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.

He knew it all. He had heard it so often in his boyhood that he could never forget ;

yet he clung to this woman, begging her to repeat, again and again, the promises which offer hope to the most guilty. As she had prayed *for* him, so now she prayed *with* him through the weary watches of the night and the early day.

Then came Brent, who, when convinced that his father must die, implored him to cast himself upon the mercy of God. "It is your only hope," said the son, forcing back the tears, that he might better do his duty.

"I will throw myself upon God's mercy," replied the father; "but it is the eleventh hour with me. Who knows that he will receive me?"

"I know that he will, if you come to him in faith and humility. He never refused any, and he will not refuse you," said Brent.

By noon Mrs. Murray, Jennie, and Mr. Stearns were with him; and after the first greetings were over, and the first tears wiped away, he asked the clergyman to pray with him. The world was of little value to him then. His theories were of little worth. The

mysterious spirit of beauty and power pervading all nature could give him no support in this his hour of need.

"I thank God that my dear ones have found a more excellent way than that in which I would have led them," he said, tenderly. "If I fail of salvation myself, they will be happy. I have not dragged them down."

His wife bent over him, feeling almost that her life would go out with his, yet struggling to say, "Thy will, O God, be done." If only he might receive assurance of forgiveness, and be permitted to rejoice in hope of a glorious immortality, she could feel that their parting was not for ever.

He believed he had committed himself to God. He acknowledged that for months he had been fully convinced of his error in regard to religion, and that he had intended to confess this to his family. He was going to see Elspeth Bawn for the purpose of inviting her to accompany him home, and he hoped that now she would go to comfort his wife.

The day waned to its close. Still there was

no change in the feelings of Mr. Murray. The Saviour's face was hidden from him. He did not deserve mercy, yet he wished all to pray that it might be granted. In the evening, as they watched beside him, praying silently or audibly, as they were moved, he exclaimed, "My sins are forgiven! Thank God, my sins are forgiven! Oh, the riches of grace! The fullness there is in Christ Jesus! Henceforth there is for me no condemnation. My sins are forgiven! I have seen the Saviour. Brent, my son, preach Christ and him crucified, — Jennie, darling, preach Christ and him crucified, — Wife, dearest and best, preach Christ, — Mr. Stearns, preach only that, — Christ, the hope of the world."

It was wonderful to listen to him as he breathed out his life, with every breath uttering some word of rejoicing or counsel. His mother's teachings came back to him; the prayers he had heard, and the Bible truths he had learned. He talked of them, and of that mother whom he soon expected to meet. Then, mindful of those who had shared his

false belief, he left messages for them, imploring them to repentance while yet there was time.

"Brent, my son, you will always care for your mother," he said, after some moments of silence; and, being assured of this, he added, "I know I can trust you. Thank God, you are a Christian. Oh! if my life could be spared I would preach the truth through all the land. Tell Father Merrill, and all the Christians at home, never to grow weary in their work. My sins are forgiven!"

His strength was rapidly failing. He took each one by the hand, pressed his cold lips to theirs, and then closed his eyes, as if to shut out all earthly sights. "Mother! Harry!" he murmured a little after. "All safe, — Christ, the hope of the world, — Heaven opened, — Jesus, Saviour, I come to Thee."

Then all was still. The pulse beat more feebly, and at midnight a widow and her fatherless children went from the room where lay their dead.

Elsbeth Bawn and Mr. Stearns were left to

make all necessary preparations for the removal of the body. The one went about with a triumphant smile upon her lips, the other strangely cheerful. With this terrible affliction had come such a manifestation of God's goodness that the Christian could not be wholly cast down.

Brent supported his mother tenderly and lovingly, reminding her of the blessing which had been granted, and the better country where two now waited until all should be gathered safe at last. "We have prayed that father might be reconciled to God, and we believe that he is. It was not for us to dictate the way in which this should be done, dear mother."

"No, my son, no. God help me to submit to his will," was her tearful reply.

Mr. Murray was but one of many victims, and his family but one of many which suffered bereavement. Sharing the sympathy of the community, they were assisted to leave as soon as possible, while at home there was no lack of willing hands to do all that was necessary.

Mrs. Merrill and Dorcas Armstrong went to the house of the deceased, and Father Merrill, old man as he was, started to meet the mourning company. Friends and relatives were notified of the sad event, and in accordance with a request forwarded by Brent, preparations were made for the funeral.

Mr. Stearns might well have pleaded fatigue as an excuse for not officiating on this occasion, but he had a message to deliver; and not one who listened to him that day, as he stood by the coffin of his friend, but realized this. If, during his life, the influence of Mr. Murray had been against religion, in death he spoke eloquently for Christ.

A long procession of mourners, followed by many neighbors and friends, walked slowly to the village cemetery, and saw the body consigned to its last resting-place. Before the winter's snow should fall, another form, now miles away, would be brought to make the family group complete.

This was Mrs. Murray's wish. No place could be to her as this quiet country town,

where she had found her Saviour, and no people so dear as those who here surrounded her. Harry would seem near to her could she stand by his grave with old Elspeth.

How much there was to hear of the last days of her son — much which she had never known, and which the good Scotch woman now delighted to tell her! Then she was told of her husband's generous kindness to one whose religion he contemned, and of the conversations which had been held between his nurse and himself before she had reached him. There was much to comfort her; and when, on a pleasant day in the late autumn, a few friends gathered around a newly opened grave, there was joy mingled with her sorrow. Father and son rested side by side.

Harry seemed sometimes to speak through the lips of her who had taught him the way of salvation; and not long after the second grave had been opened and closed in the Murray lot, a precious message was received from the dead. There came to Brent a rough, stained sheet of paper, covered with nearly

illegible writing. The address, however, written in full at the head of the sheet, was still distinct — "Brent Murray, my dear son."

An accompanying note explained that it had been found under a heap of rubbish, and thinking it might be valued by him to whom it was addressed, even discolored as it was, a stranger had preserved it. Valued it was, indeed. Brent Murray studied every word, carefully retracing every line, until he was sure of each sentence.

It was a confession of his father's faith, unfinished, but still sufficient to leave no doubt of its full import. The death-bed repentance was not merely the despairing act of one smitten with a sudden fear of God's retributive justice. In this letter, penciled as he rode to see old Elspeth, he had expressed his happiness in the thought that, despite his influence, his family had trusted in the living God. "I believe you are right, my son. I have long believed this. I have been wrong. God forgive me, and help me to retrieve the past. I have tried to pr—" Here paper and pencil must have fallen from his hand.

Not for his whole patrimony would Brent Murray have parted with this stained sheet. It was more to him than houses or lands. Mrs. Murray read the message, coming to them after so many days of silence, eagerly scanning the lines, and thanking God that thus assurance was made doubly sure. Mr. Stearns, Father Merrill, and all interested in the family, shared their joy.

In health, with mind unimpaired, and in full possession of his powers, Mr. Murray had left this testimony, which no one could deny. His old friends could not say that he had given his adherence to religion only when pain and weakness had beclouded his brain. It was a well-considered act, to which he had been forced by strong convictions of duty.

Brent still lingered at home, unwilling to leave his mother in her loneliness until she proposed that he should return to his studies. Her daughter and Elspeth Bawn would remain with her, and she was anxious that he should lose no time on her account.

Before leaving, however, there was some business to be transacted. Mr. Cofran was chosen to attend to this, although Brent's judgment was consulted at every step. In a few months he would attain his majority, and meanwhile Mr. Cofran could be implicitly trusted. The first question asked was in relation to the farm, which had never been a source of profit to the late owner.

"If it is for sale, I know of a purchaser," said Mr. Cofran. "Mr. Goddard will be glad to buy it for his creditor, Mr. Merrill. He had intended to propose this to your father, and he can pay cash down, unless you ask a large advance on the original price. I suppose you know why the place was sold to your father."

"Yes, sir, I do," was the reply. "I have often heard the story, and I have seen the young man who went to work to redeem the place. A splendid fellow he is, too. For my part I should prefer that Father Merrill should take the farm into his own hands. Mother can build a house here in the village, and I presume she will think best to sell. I know

she would be glad to see the old people in their true home."

Mrs. Murray was consulted. She would hardly have opposed her son under any circumstances, but in this case her wishes coincided with his. She would have Mr. and Mrs. Merrill for neighbors, and so soon as might be a contract was made for the return of the property to its former owner at the price for which it had been sold.



CHAPTER XXI.

FATHER MERRILL'S THANKSGIVING.

THERE was not a person in town who did not rejoice that Father Merrill was "as well off as ever;" but many wished he had "been paid the money, and staid where he was." Dorcas Armstrong, unselfish as she was, and dearly as she loved her cousins, found it hard to reconcile herself to losing them from her immediate neighborhood. She would have given them the Mason farm outright, if thus she could have retained them.

As for the two most interested, they were so grateful for all the favors showered upon them, that they could find no words adequate to express their emotion. The Lord's hand was so plainly visible to them that they were

looking forward to what might happen hereafter. They said this to each other the first evening spent together in the old west room, after they were reinstated in their home.

"I'm waiting for something more, mother. The last five years have been our best years. I've seen wondrous things in that time, things that make me feel God's presence as I never did before. What if we'd staid here, mother, when the neighbors wanted us to?"

"'Twould all been wrong if you had, and we'd been punished for our sin. You never could recommended religion after you'd showed that you counted property above Christian honesty."

"No, mother; and I'm afraid Dorcas wouldn't been a Christian. There mightn't been any prayer meeting in Dan Mason's house, and Mr. Murray and his family might lived on just they were. And then there's George Esty. Let us give thanks to God for all his mercies."

Kneeling, they offered such thanks as those may whose hearts are burdened by the gratitude they feel. Father Merrill was gifted in

prayer; but his words were now strangely broken and his voice husky. No adversity could have so humbled him before God, no affliction so impressed him with a sense of his own unworthiness.

Mr. Goddard's family came over to rejoice with them, and then there was a holiday indeed. From the oldest to the youngest, each brought some token of regard, something which was to be counted among the household treasures. Not fearful or trembling was the father now, as clasping the outstretched hand of his friend, he exclaimed, "Thank God that I have lived to see this day!"

"Do you really thank God?" asked the old man, seriously.

"Yes, Father Merrill, I do," was the reply. "Perhaps not as you do, because I am not such a Christian as you are; but in my way I thank him."

"And do you thank him for having sent his Son into the world to suffer and die for sinners?"

"I do, Father Merrill; and I hope through

his grace to be saved. If I know my own heart, I have truly repented of my sins. I should never be what I am but for you: never," repeated this man, as tears, of which he was not ashamed, dimmed his eyes. "I never thought of you without remembering what you had said to me about my duty, and then your example has been more eloquent than your words. My Ben, too, he has preached to me, and at last I found that my whole family would enter the kingdom before me."

"This is better news than you brought me when you brought a deed of this place," said Mr. Merrill. "I've been praying I might hear it; but I'd said so much to you I thought 'twas best not to say any more. I knew Ben would have more influence than I could. A good deal has happened since I went away from here five years ago, and I never should blamed you if I hadn't come back."

"I should have blamed myself," was the reply. "But I really believe my failure was the best thing ever happened to me. Ben

won't get through his studies so young, but his experience the last years will do him good all his life. He'll have more sympathy for people that earn their living with their hands, and a minister needs to have that. If I an't mistaken, he'll make a good minister."

"I don't doubt it. He'll please people to begin with, and the more they see him the better they'll like him. He and Frank Clifford will make first-rate ministers, not much alike, but both good in their own way."

"And Brent Murray. I heard his father wanted him to be a preacher at last."

"Yes, he wanted everybody to preach Christ and him crucified; but I think Brent will study law, as he intended. I shouldn't advise him to change. We need Christian lawyers as well as ministers. I'm glad we're going to have him near us some of the time. You know Mrs. Murray has bought the Bancroft house, and it will be repaired as soon as the weather is warmer."

Here a call from some of the younger people interrupted this conversation, and presently

there was such a confusion of tongues that Mrs. Goddard was tempted to exercise her authority. But Mrs. Merrill, so glad and so happy that nothing could trouble her, insisted that there was none too much noise.

Ben, junior, less demonstrative than his brothers and sisters on this occasion, yet manifested the greatest satisfaction. His fondest hopes had been realized, and his best aspirations gave promise of fulfillment. He found opportunity for a quiet talk with Father Merrill, and this was to him the best part of the visit; but when the long anticipated day drew to a close, so much remained to be said that it was late before the guests bade their host and hostess good night.

"Now, if we could have a visit from George, 'twould seem as though we was really settled," remarked mother Merrill, as she busied herself in returning chairs and footstools to their usual places. "I want him to think of us as we be here. I'm glad to live here again, though I thought I didn't care much about it. 'Twill be pleasant to see the corn and the

grain grow where they used to. I hope George will think he can come up, now the railroad runs so near."

"I wish he would, mother; but I don't expect it. We musn't expect too much of him. Mr. Stearns says he's going to be a grand business man, and Mr. Clapp will do well by him. It's most time for us to have a letter from him. Strange how much I think of that boy, and how near he seems to me. I wish I knew if Mabel's boy was living. I've thought a good deal about him lately."

Mrs. Merrill was about to reply to this, when Charley Stearns came in, bringing a letter for grandpa, — just the letter which was expected. George Esty always wrote in such a frank, familiar way, that reading one of his epistles was next to seeing him, and the old people counted on their arrival.

"He don't forget us any more than we do him," was mother Merrill's comment. "But I wish he wouldn't thank us any more for what we done for him. It's likely to me he'll have a chance to do as much for somebody else."

He did endeavor to improve his opportunities for doing good ; but his sense of obligation was so great, that his own efforts for others seemed insignificant when compared with the kindness he had received. Will Downs was not the only poor boy he had assisted, although, perhaps, Will had been most benefited and most grateful.

One morning, about a month after he had written a congratulatory letter to Mr. and Mrs. Merrill, the little fellow came to him with a pitiful story about a young man that was sick and poor. The man had a wife and a child, and the neighbors said they had been most starved. Would Mr. Esty go to see them ?

"Mother told me to ask you," said the boy. "She says the man won't say much to anybody ; but perhaps he'll talk to you."

After the store was closed the next evening, George Esty called upon Mrs. Downs, and from her learned more of the young man he was desired to visit.

"I noticed him when he first moved into the neighborhood, about three months ago, and he

looked to me as though he'd been dissipated," remarked the woman. "Them that live in the house with him say they han't seen him when he wan't sober ; but he's terribly poor. He han't had much work, and his wife's so young she can't know how to make the most of what he earns. I shouldn't think she was more than sixteen. I've been in several times, but they an't either of them inclined to talk. I thought, perhaps, you'd be the right one to find out about them."

Mr. Esty went at once to the house where this stranger had found a home. Following the directions he had received, he rapped for admittance at the door of an upper room. A sweet faced woman, who, but for the child in her arms, might herself have been called a child, bade him enter, and offered him the only chair in the poor apartment.

After some questions had been asked, which were answered with evident reluctance, the visitor said, "I wish you would regard me as a friend. A few years ago, when I had done wrong, and was in great trouble, two old

people befriended me; and when I tried to thank them, they told me to do for some one else what they had done for me. I can't do as much for you as Father Merrill did for me, because you are not suffering as I was, but if you will give me your confidence, I will do what I can."

"What was the name you said?" asked the sick man, for the first time looking at his visitor. "Who was it helped you?"

"Father Merrill. Everybody calls him Father; but his name is Seth."

"Where does he live?" This question was asked more eagerly, and when answered, George Esty was startled by hearing, "That man is my grandfather. My name is Seth Merrill Grant. I've always meant to go to my mother's native town; but I've put it off, as I have most every thing else I ought to have done. I was only six months old when my mother died, and my father died when I was ten years old, so I never heard much about my grandparents. They were the old people that told you to help somebody?"

"Yes," answered the visitor, not yet recovered from his surprise. "But are you sure they are your grandparents?"

"Yes, sir, I am. Nellie, give the gentleman the Bible. It's one my mother's father gave to her when she was married. You'll find their names in it."

True, there they were:

"Mabel Merrill,

From her Father,

Seth Merrill."

"I should know that writing anywhere," said George Esty. "I have heard Father Merrill speak of having a grandchild named for him. Now please regard me as acting for him, and tell me how I can be of service to you."

"Nellie, just leave me alone with this gentleman a while," said the sick man to his wife. "Take the baby into Mrs. Markland's room. My wife, child as she is, thinks I'm a good man," he added, when the door had closed behind her. "But she is mistaken; though I've tried to be good to her. She is too young to

be married; but when her mother died she was alone in the world, and she clung to me as her only friend. Poor Nellie! She has had a hard time. Will you tell me your name, so that I may know who I'm talking to?"

This being done, the visitor seated himself by the bed, and listened to the history of a life which seemed to have been a struggle between noble impulses and strong temptations to evil. Seth Grant's father had thought to send him to his grandparents; but neglecting to do this, his step-mother had found the boy too useful to be willing to part with him, although she gave him little of mother love. At sixteen he commenced to learn a trade, after which he found plenty of employment until within a year. His habits, however, had been such that sometimes, for weeks, he would remain idle. Sure of good wages when he pleased to apply himself, he spent his money freely, and it was his kindness to her mother which had won the love of his wife. A mistake in his work, made while partially intoxicated, which had caused a loss to his employer,

resulted in his discharge and consequent disgrace.

This occurred a few months after his marriage, and since then everything had gone wrong with him. His wife, "poor Nellie," as he called her, had been an incumbrance as he sought work in different places. He had come to this city, hoping to improve his condition, but he was a stranger, and it had been impossible for him to obtain employment of any kind sufficient to meet their necessary expenses. He had lived, day after day, without a full meal of even the coarsest food.

"Sometimes I had only a piece of bread; but Nellie never went hungry," he said. "I told her I had eaten something before I came home; but the day before I was taken down, I didn't taste of a mouthful. She don't know it, poor child. 'Twas starving made me sick; and then I missed the liquor I'd been used to. I han't tasted a drop since I came to this city; and come what will, I've done with it. We've had good neighbors; but it's been so hard for me to take charity. I wouldn't if it hadn't

been for Nellie and the baby. I'd have died first. It wouldn't make much difference if I was alone. I must die sometime; and life hasn't been so pleasant. I need to cling to it. Excuse me, sir. Now I've begun to talk, it seems as though I couldn't stop. I wish you'd tell me about my grandparents."

"They are two of the best people in the world," was George Esty's quick reply. "They live nearer to God than any others I have ever known, and they are universally respected. You have reason to be proud of them."

"And they have reason to be proud of me, a miserable good-for-nothing." This was said, bitterly; but before answer could be made, the speaker added, "I'm ashamed to look a good man or woman in the face. You don't know what it is to feel like that."

"Yes, I do. I know it by my own experience. I know, too, that you can make yourself worthy of your relationship to Father Merrill. Let me help you. Do you need a physician?"

"No, sir. I only need something to eat.

There's been enough brought in, but I couldn't eat it. It chokes me when I try."

"This isn't a suitable room for you," remarked the visitor.

"It's the best I could afford, and to-morrow my time's up here. But if I could get able to work, and find work to do, I needn't be a beggar."

"You're not a beggar," was the comforting assurance given to the sick man. "I owe a debt to your grandparents, and what I do for you is the same as done for them. Excuse me now for a while. I will see you again within an hour."

On the next landing George Esty met the pale-faced woman with her child, and stopping only to assure her that he would care for her husband, he hastened to Mrs. Downs, with whom he took counsel. Various plans were discussed, until Will said, "Let them have the new kitchen and bedroom, and then we shall have as much room as we had when the old shed was here."

So it was agreed, and before ten o'clock the

family were settled in the rooms which Mrs. Downs had thought quite indispensable to her own comfort. Mr. Esty was to pay the rent, and provide all that was necessary until such time as the occupant was able to work. Mrs. Downs was told that her tenant was a relative of some of Mr. Esty's friends, and this was sufficient to enlist her best efforts in his behalf.

The next morning meat, groceries, and fuel were sent in such abundance to the rooms of Seth Grant, that Nellie counted herself rich. Her husband was able to sit up that morning, and in her delight she flitted about with real childlike gayety, now and then appealing to her neighbor to know what she should do with certain articles which had come into her possession. "Poor child," murmured her husband, looking at her compassionately; but she knew no reason why she should be pitied. His illness had been the greatest affliction of her life. She did not remember her father, and when her mother died there remained this, to her, one friend, dearer than all the

world beside. Him she trusted so implicitly that she could not dream he would do wrong, and when misfortune came to them she did not blame him for aught he had done or failed to do.

Having begun a good work, George Esty did not flag in its execution. The evening found him again with Seth Grant, whom he encouraged, counseled, and warned with hearty earnestness. To save this man, and one day to present him to his grandparents worthy of their love and confidence, would be the best expression of a gratitude which deepened with every remembrance of the kindness which had awakened it.

A few days of generous living restored the invalid to something of his wonted strength, and his friend having found employment for him, he commenced work with high hopes. He had been called a jolly fellow as he worked, and drank, and gambled with reckless gayety, as though life was but a farce, and he a soulless being. Now he worked at his best, realizing that for every act and word he was accountable to God.

He begged to be allowed to repay his benefactor ; but this being peremptorily refused, when he held in his hand a month's wages, all his own, he was rich as Nellie had been when she counted her store of good things. An appeal was made to Mrs. Downs to know how this money should be spent, and she, in her motherly way, advised that Sunday suits should be bought. This would enable them to attend church, and so please their friend, which was sufficient reason why the advice should be accepted.

Then there was a new delight over the well-made, neatly-fitting garments, and if anything was needed to complete their happiness, it was supplied when Mr. Esty walked home from church with them, and sitting down to their table, ate and drank as one in no way above them.

Seth Grant's better nature being in the ascendant, there was a look in his face like Father Merrill, as he said, " I think, perhaps, I'll make something of a man after all. At any rate I shall try. It did me good to hear

that minister preach to-day. When I'm good enough, I want you to tell my grandfather about me ; but not now ; wait till I'm better off."

George Esty acquiesced in this ; and so it was that through all the summer and early autumn one letter after another was written to Father Merrill, with never a word of his grandchildren. At length, a week before the time-honored New England holiday, which calls her sons and daughters home, the young man wrote to say that he was coming that way, and had invited some friends to share the hospitality which had been offered to himself.

" Of course we shall be glad to see them all," said mother Merrill, and forthwith proceeded, with Betsy's help, to make preparations for a grand Thanksgiving. The expected guests arrived at the appointed time, when George Esty had no reason to blush for his friends, or feel that he had presumed in inviting them to accompany him.

Supper was in readiness, and all were seated round the table, when Betsy exclaimed, " Why,

Mr. Grant, you look enough like Father Merrill to be his son!"

"Thank you for the compliment," replied the stranger.

Mother Merrill adjusted her spectacles, and looked at the man sitting beside her husband. Betsy was confused at the thought of her abrupt speech, and even Mr. Grant seemed embarrassed.

George Esty said, "Father Merrill, your eldest daughter was married — was she not?"

"Yes, and her husband's name was Grant. Be you a relative of his?" asked the old man, turning to his stranger guest.

"I am his son," was the reply.

"Mabel's son?"

"Yes, sir."

"My boy!" There was a world of pathos in these words, as Mrs. Merrill uttered them, rising from her seat.

To give an adequate description of the scene which followed would be impossible. There were tears, and sobs, and embracings, with murmured thanks and expressions of joy, while

he who had for months anticipated this meeting bowed his head and wept. It was a full hour before any one could think of eating, and then small justice was done to the supper.

The next day was a Thanksgiving, indeed. The good news seemed to be borne on the wings of the wind, and there were few families in town which did not know that Father Merrill's grandson had come to visit the old folks. But why he had come at this time, and with George Esty, was known only to those most interested.

Within a few hours after his arrival, Seth Grant, alone with his grandparents, had told this story, making no effort to conceal or excuse his faults. Such as they were, the bane of his life and the cause of his misfortunes, he frankly confessed them.

"But, Seth, my boy, you've made up your mind to do different," said his grandfather.

"Yes, sir, I have, or you wouldn't have seen me," was the reply. "Mr. Esty has done for me all that one man can do for another, and when he said you had no need to be ashamed

of me, then I came." It was now George Esty's turn to receive thanks from his old friends, and again from Mr. and Mrs. Grant for having introduced them to such a delightful home. Even the baby seemed to smile more lovingly upon him, while Betsy assured him that they were all ready to worship him.

I will not say that Father Merrill was proud of the really fine-looking man who stood beside him in church the next day, and whom all could recognize as his grandson, but it is true that his thanksgivings were like psalms of triumph. Those who remembered Mabel Merrill were desirous to speak to her son, and before the day had closed he felt himself no longer a stranger.

Nellie, his sweet young wife, basked in the sunshine of affection which surrounded her, and grew radiant under its influence. "Just babies, she and her baby both," said Betsy, taking them to her heart with something of the fondness manifested by mother Merrill.

George Esty remained with his friends two days, when he returned to the city, leaving

Mr. and Mrs. Grant to complete their visit without him. At the end of two weeks, which was far too short for all that must be said and done, they, too, parted from the old people, with many assurances of regard and promises of future meeting.

Looking after them as long as they were in view, Father Merrill repeated, in a clear, ringing voice, "Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come."

Twenty years. What changes had occurred! Children had grown to be men and women. Young men and maidens had become fathers and mothers. The old had laid aside their earthly garments, and the places which had known them would know them no more. Yet Father and mother Merrill still blessed the world by their presence, and gladdened the hearts of those who loved them.

The old man's ninetieth birthday was made the occasion of the reunion of his relatives and friends, — some coming from a distance, and all eager to do him honor. His grandchildren

and great-grandchildren, — the latter a group of six sons and daughters, each bearing the old family name, — were first among the welcome guests.

Then Dorcas Armstrong, a hale, robust woman, although she was nearing the seventieth milestone in her life's journey, and with her the children whom God had given her, Henry and Maggie Wyman. Henry had achieved great success as an architect, and Maggie was the happy wife of Brent Murray, who had made for himself a brilliant reputation. He had found it possible to obey his father's dying injunction while prosecuting his daily business, and counted his Christian honor above gold or preferment.

George Esty, the prosperous merchant, came with wife and children, each bringing some tribute of affection. Mr. Goddard's entire family was present. Ben, an eloquent preacher, who had in no way disappointed his friends, and who, now that he was husband and father, made his home the brightest spot on earth for those who shared it with him.

Frank Clifford, too, a man rich in this world's goods, yet richer far in his goodness and greatness as an ambassador for Christ. With him is one we have known as Jennie Murray, and still another, the image of himself, a manly boy, who watches over Mrs. Murray with rare devotion. Mr. Stearns and his household, a goodly company, who, from their earliest years, had loved and respected grandpa and grandma Merrill.

Many others there were crowding the spacious rooms, and congratulating the old people upon having lived to see this day, each and all remembering some deed of kindness or word of encouragement which must be acknowledged.

Father and mother Merrill, so loved and honored, looked around upon their guests with undimmed eyes, save as they grew misty with tears. Life with them was waning to its close, yet they stood erect, with the same expression upon their faces which had glorified them in the years that were past, and the same glowing happiness in their hearts.

As they were about to separate, the old man repeated his favorite text, and prayed that God would grant them "another meeting in the upper temple, from which they should go no more out."



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