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LIFE IN LONDON

OR, THE PITFALLS OF A GREAT CITY

BY EDWIN HODDER, ESQ.

1890.

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CHAPTER I.

THE INTRODUCTION.

Breathless and excited, George Weston came running down a street in Islington. He knocked at the door of No. 16, and in his impatience, until it was opened, commenced a tattoo with his knuckles upon the panels.

"Oh, mother, mother, I have got such splendid news!" he cried, as he hurried down stairs into the room where Mrs. Weston, with her apron on and sleeves tucked up, was busy in her domestic affairs. "Such splendid news!" repeated George. "I have been down to Mr. Compton's with the

letter Uncle Henry gave me, in which he said I wanted a situation, and should be glad if Mr. Compton could help me; and, sure enough, I was able to see him, and he is such a kind, fatherly old gentleman, mother. I am sure I shall like him."

"Well, George, and what did he say!"

"Oh! I've got ever so much to tell you, before I come to that part. The office, you know, is in Falcon Court, Fleet Street; such a dismal place, with the houses all crammed together, and a little space in front, not more than large enough to turn a baker's bread-truck in. All the windows are of ground glass, as if the people inside were too busy to see out, or to be seen; and on every door there are lots of names of people who have their offices there, and some of them are actually right up at the top storeys of the houses. Well, I found out the name of Mr. Compton, and I tapped at a door where 'Clerk's Office' was written. I think I ought not to have tapped, but to have gone in, for somebody said rather sharply, 'Come in,' and in I went. An old gentleman was standing beside a sort of counter, with a lot of heavy books on it, and he asked me what I wanted. I said I wanted to see Mr. Compton, and had got a letter for him. He told me to sit down until Mr. Compton was disengaged, and then he would see me."

"And what sort of an office was it, George? And who was the old gentleman? The manager, I suppose!"

"I think he was, because he seemed to do as he liked, and all the clerks talked in a whisper while he was there. I had to wait more than half-an-hour, and I was able to look round and see all that was going on. It is a large office, and there were ten clerks seated on uncomfortable high stools, without backs, poring over books and papers. I don't think I shall like those clerks, they stared at me so rudely, and I felt so ashamed, because one looked hard at me, and then whispered to another: and I believe they were saying something about my boots, which you know, mother, are terribly down at heel, and so I put one foot over the other, to try and hide them."

"There was no need of that, George. It did not alter the fact that they were down at heel; and there is no disgrace in being clothed only as respectable as we can afford, is there?"

"Not a bit, mother: and I feel so vexed with myself because I knew I turned red, which made the two clerks smile. But I must go on telling you what else I saw. The old gentleman seems quite a character--he is nearly bald, has got no whiskers, wears a big white neckcloth and a tail coat, and takes snuff every five minutes out of a silver box. Whether he knows it or not, the clerks are very rude to him: for when he took snuff, one of them sneezed, or pretended to sneeze, every time, and another snuffled, as if he were taking snuff too."

"That certainly does not speak well for the clerks," said Mrs. Weston. "Old gentlemen do have peculiar ways sometimes, but it is not right for young people to ridicule them."

"No, it is not; and I don't like to see people do a thing behind another one's back they are afraid to do before his face. When the clerks had to speak to the old gentleman, they were as civil as possible, and said, 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,' to him so meekly, as if they were quite afraid of him; but after a little while, when he took up his hat and went out, they all began talking and laughing out loud, although when he was there, they had only occasionally spoken in low whispers. There was only one young man, out of the whole lot, who did not join with them, but kept at his work; and I thought if I got a situation in that office, I should try and make friends with him."

"That's right, George. I would rather you should not have a situation at all, than get mixed up with bad companions. But go on, I am so anxious to hear what Mr. Compton said."

"Well, after half-an-hour, I heard a door in the next room close, and a table-bell touched, and then the old gentleman, who had by this time returned, went in. Presently he came out again, and said Mr. Compton would see me. Oh, mother! I felt so funny, you don't know. My mouth got quite dry, my face flushed, and I couldn't think whatever I should say, I felt just as I did that day at the school examination, when I had to make one of the prize speeches. But I got all to rights directly I saw Mr. Compton. He said, 'Good morning to you--be seated,' in such a nice way, that I felt at home with him at once."

"And what did you say to him, George?"

"I had learnt by heart what I was going to say, but in the hurry I had forgotten every word. So I said, 'My name is--' (it's a wonder I did not say Norval, for I felt a bit bewildered at the sound of my own voice) '--my name is George Weston, sir, and I have brought you a letter from my uncle, Mr. Henry Brunton, who knows you, I think.' 'Oh! yes," he said, 'he knows me very well; and, if I mistake not, this letter is about you, for he was talking to me about a nephew the other day.' Isn't that just like Uncle Henry?--he never said anything about that to us, but he is so good and kind, we are always finding out some of his generous actions, about which he never speaks. While Mr. Compton was reading the letter, I had leisure to look at him, and at his room. He is such a fine-looking old man, just like that picture we saw in the Academy, last year, of the village squire. He looks as if he were very benevolent and kind-hearted, and he dresses just like some of the country gentlemen, with a dark green coat and velvet collar, a frill shirt, and a little bit of buff waistcoat seen under his coat, which he keeps buttoned. He had got lots of books, and papers, and files about, and sat in an arm-chair so cosily--in fact, I should not have thought that nice carpeted room was really an office, if it had not been for the ground-glass windows. Just as I was thinking why it was the glorious sunshine is not admitted into offices, Mr. Compton said--"

"What did he say, George? I have waited so patiently to hear."

"He said, 'Well, _Mr_. Weston,'--(he did really call me Mr. Weston,

mother; I suppose he took me for a young man: it is evident he did not know I was wearing a stick-up shirt collar for the first time in my life)--I have read this letter, and am inclined to think I may be able to do something for you.' That put my 'spirits up,' as poor father used to say; and I said, 'I'm very glad to hear it, Sir.' So then he told me that he wanted a junior clerk in his office, who could write quickly, be brisk at accounts, and make himself generally useful, as the advertisements in the Times say. I told him I could do all these things; and he passed me a sheet of paper, to give him a specimen of my handwriting. I hardly knew what to write, but I fixed upon a passage of Scripture, 'Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.' My hand was so shaky, that all the letters with tails to them had the queerest flourishes you ever saw. Mr. Compton smiled when I handed him the sheet of paper--I don't know whether it was at the writing, or at the quotation, and I wished I had written a passage from Seneca instead!"

"You did not feel ashamed at having written a part of God's word, did you, George?"

"No, not ashamed, mother; but I thought it was not business-like, and seemed too much like a schoolboy."

"I think it was very business-like. It would convey the idea that you would seek to do your business from the best and highest motives. But what did Mr. Compton say?"

"He only said he thought the handwriting was good. Then he told me that he would take me as his clerk, and should expect me to be at my post next Monday morning, at nine o'clock. 'And now,' he said, 'we must fix upon a salary; and as your uncle has told me that you are anxious to maintain yourself, I will give you a weekly sum sufficient for that purpose; and if you give me satisfaction, I will raise it yearly.' And what do you think he offered me, mother?"

"I really do not know; perhaps, as you are young, and have never been in a situation before, he said five shillings a week, although I did not think you would get any salary at all for the first six months."

"No, mother, more than five shillings; guess again," said George, his face shining with excited delight.

"Then I will guess seven and sixpence a week," said his mother, doubtfully, for she thought she had gone too high.

"More than that, mother; guess only once more, for I cannot keep it in if you are not very quick."

"Then I shall say ten shillings a week, George; but I am afraid I have guessed too much."

"No, mother, under the mark again. I am to have ten shillings and sixpence--half a guinea a week! Isn't that splendid? Only fancy, Mr.

George Weston, Junior Clerk to Mr. Compton, at half-a-guinea a week! My fortune is made; and, depend upon it, mother, we shall get on in the world now, first-rate. Why, I shall only want--say, half-a-crown a week for myself, and then there will be all the rest for you. Now don't you think blind-eyed Fortune must have dropped her bandage this morning, and have spied me out?"

"No, George; but I think that kind Providence; which has always smiled upon us when we have been in the greatest difficulties, has once more shown us that all our ways are in the hands of One who doeth all things well."

"So do I, mother; and I do hope that this success, which has attended my journey this morning, may turn out to our real good. I feel it will--we shall be able to go on now so swimmingly, and I shall be getting a footing in the world, so that by-and-bye we shan't have a single debt, or a single care, and you will be growing younger as fast as I grow older: and then, after a time, we will get a little house in the country, and finish up our days the happiest couple in the British dominions."

For the remainder of that day, poor George was in a regular whirl of excitement. A thousand schemes were afloat in his mind about the future, of the most improbable kind. His income of half-a-guinea a week was to do wonders, which were never accomplished by half a score of guineas. He speculated about the rise in his salary at the end of the year, which he was determined, if it rested upon his own industry, should not be less than a pound a week; and then he forgot the first year, and commenced calculating what he could do, with his increased salary, till, at last, worn out with scheming, he said,--

"Money is a great bother, after all, mother. I've been calculating all this day how we can spend my salary; and I am really more perplexed than if Mr. Compton had said I should not have anything for the first six months. I can't make ends meet if I attempt to do what I have planned, that's very certain; so I shall quietly wait till the first Saturday night comes, and I feel the half-guinea in my hand, and then I shall better realize what it is worth."

That was a pleasant evening Mrs. Weston and George spent together in discussing the events of the day, and when it became time to separate for the night, she said--

"This is one of the happiest days we have spent for a long time, George. How your poor father would have enjoyed sharing it with us!" and the widow sighed.

"Mother," said George, "I have thought of poor father so many times to-day, and I have formed a resolution which I mean to try and keep. He was a good man. I don't think he ever did anything really wrong--and I recollect so well what he used to tell me, when I was a boy"--(George had jumped into manhood in a day, he fancied)--"I mean to take him for a model; and if I find myself placed in dangers and difficulties, I shall

always ask myself, 'What would father have done if he had been in this case?' and then I should try and do as he would."

"May you have strength given to you, my dear boy, to carry out every good resolution! But remember, there is a model which must be taken even before that of your father. I mean the pure, sinless example of our Lord; follow this, and adhere to the plain directions of God's word, and you cannot go wrong. And now, good night; God bless you, my son!"

It was a long time before George went to sleep; again and again the events of the day came to his memory, and he travelled in thought far into the future, peering through the mist which hung over unborn time, and weighing circumstances which might never have a being.

"I shall be quite accustomed to my duties by next Monday," he said to his mother in the morning; "for I was all night long busy in the office, counting money, posting books, and when I awoke I was just signing a deed of partnership in the name of Compton and Weston."

CHAPTER II.

SCHOOL-BOY DAYS.

George Weston was an only son, and, at the time our story commences, was nearly seventeen years of age. His early years had been spent at home, under the watchful care of kind and good parents. When he was ten years old he was sent to a boarding school at Folkestone, and placed in the charge of Dr. Seaward, a good man, who superintended his education, and, besides imparting secular instruction, endeavoured to train his character and make him good as well as clever. George was a sharp, shrewd boy, a keen observer, who would know the why and the wherefore of everything, and his lessons always came to him more as an amusement than a task. He had a horror of being low down in his class, and if he did not retain his place at the top, it was rarely through inattention or want of study on his part.

George was a great favourite with the whole school; he was a merry, joyous fellow, who always had sunshine in his face and a kind word on his lips; a ringleader in any harmless fun, and a champion on the side of all the younger boys who met with oppression or injustice from the elder classes. At cricket or football, swimming or boating, George had few superiors; and as he was one of those boys who seem determined, whatever they do, to do it with all their might, he went heart and soul into all the spoils with such a zest and earnestness that he acquired the name of the "Indefatigable." Nor did this name merely apply to his zeal in sports. There was not in the whole school a more diligent student than George: there was for him "a time to work and a time to play," and he never allowed one to trespass upon the other. He would rather go without a game at cricket for a fortnight than be behindhand

in one of his lessons. The boys would laugh at him for this, but George could bear to be laughed at on such points, because he knew he was in the right. "I came to school to learn," he would say, "and I don't see any fun in making my parents pay heavy fees for me every year to play cricket at the expense of study." Every boy knew there was wisdom in this, and they secretly admired George for it, although it condemned their own conduct, more especially when they had to go to him not unfrequently, and say, "Weston, I shall get in a scrape with these lessons to-morrow, unless you can help me a bit with them. Do give me a leg up, that's a good fellow!" and though George never said "No," he did sometimes take an opportunity to say, "If you did not waste so much time in play, you might be independent of any help that I can give."

It was a source of great pleasure to his parents to hear from time to time, through Dr. Seaward, some good account of his conduct; and when he returned home at the holiday seasons, generally laden with prizes which he had victoriously borne off, they did not feel a little proud of their only son.

George remained at the school at Folkestone for five years, during which time he rose from the lowest to the highest form. It was the intention of his parents then to place him in a college for a year or two, in order to give him in opportunity to complete his education, and have the means to make a good start in life. But this purpose was frustrated by an event which happened only a month before George was to have been removed.

One day, when all the boys were out in the playfield, busily engaged in marking out boundaries for a game at hockey, Dr. Seaward was seen coming from the house towards the field. This was an unusual event, as he rarely interfered with them during play hours. "Something's up," said the boys; and waited expectantly until the Doctor came up to them.

"Call George Weston," said he; "I want to speak to him."

"Weston! George Weston!" shouted one or two at once; and George came running up, nothing abashed, for he knew he had done nothing wrong.

"George," said the Doctor, laying a hand on his shoulder, "I want you to come with me; I have something to tell you;" and they walked together away from the field.

"What is it, sir? You look pained: I hope I have done nothing to offend you?"

"No, George," replied the Doctor; "few lads have ever given me so little cause of offence at any time as you have. But I _am_ pained. I have some sad news to tell you."

"Sad news for me, sir? Oh, do tell me at once. Is anything the matter at home?"

"Yes, George; a messenger has just arrived to say that your father has

met with a serious accident; he has been thrown from his chaise, and is much hurt. The messenger is your uncle, Mr. Brunton; and he desires you to return at once to London with him."

George waited to hear no more; he bounded away from the Doctor, cleared the fence which enclosed the garden at a leap, and rushed into the room where Mr. Brunton was anxiously awaiting him. No tear stood in his eye; but he was dreadfully pale, and his hands trembled like aspen leaves. "Oh, uncle!" was all he could say; and, throwing himself into a chair, he covered his face with his hands.

"Come, George, my boy," said Mr. Brunton, tenderly; "do not give way to distress. Your poor father is seriously hurt, but he is yet alive. We have just half an hour to catch the train."

That was enough for George; in a moment he was calm and collected, ran up to his room to make a few hasty arrangements, and in five minutes was again with his uncle prepared for the journey.

"Good-bye, Dr. Seaward," he said as he left the house.

"God bless you, my young friend," said the kind-hearted Doctor; "and grant that you may find His providence better than your fears."

George thought he had never known the train go so slowly as it did during that long, wearisome journey to London. At last it arrived at the terminus, and then, jumping into a cab, they were hurried away towards Stamford Hill as quickly as the horse could travel.

"Now, George," said Mr. Brunton, as they came near their journey's end, "we know not what may have happened while we have been coming here. Be a man, and recollect there is one who suffers more than you."

"Do not fear, uncle. I will not add to my mother's grief," was all he could reply.

We will not pry into that interview between mother and son when they first met; there is a grief too solemn for a stranger's eye.

Mr. Weston was still alive, and that was all that could be said. The doctors had pronounced his case beyond human skill, and had intimated that there were but a few hours for him on earth.

As George stood beside the bed of his dying father, the tears which had been long pent up came pouring thick and fast down his cheek.

"Don't give way to sorrow, George," said his father, in a low voice, for he had difficulty in speaking; "it will be only a little while before we meet again; for what is life but a vapour, which soon vanisheth away?"

"Oh, father, it is so sudden, so sudden!" sobbed George.

"Therefore, my boy, remember that at all times there is but a step

between us and death; and if for us to live is Christ, then to die is gain. Make that your motto through life, my dear boy, 'For me to live is Christ.'"

That night the silver cord was loosed, the golden bowl was broken, and the spirit of Mr. Weston returned to God who gave it. "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His saints."

Never did a mother more realize the joy of possessing the unbounded love of an affectionate son, than did Mrs. Weston during those melancholy days between the death and the funeral of her husband, "Cheer up, dear mother," he would say; "God is the father of the fatherless, and the husband of the widow, and did not _He_ say 'to die is gain'?"

George and Mr. Brunton followed the remains of the good man to their last resting-place; and then the body was lowered to the grave "in the sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection."

Mr. Weston had not been a rich man, nor had he been a far-seeing, provident man. He had moved in comfortable circumstances, with an income only sufficient to pay his way in the world, and had made but scanty provision for the future. At the time of his sudden death, his affairs were in anything but a satisfactory state; and it was found that it would be impossible for his widow to live in the same comfortable style she had formerly done.

After all his accounts were wound up, it was seen that she would only have a sufficient sum of money, even if invested in the best possible manner, to keep her in humble circumstances. She determined therefore to leave her house at Stamford Hill, and take a smaller one in Islington, and let some of the rooms to boarders.

Mr. Brunton acted the part of a kind brother in all her difficulties; he was never wearied in advising her, and on him principally devolved all the necessary arrangements for her removal. Everything he did was with such delicacy and refinement that, although his hand was daily and hourly felt, it was never seen.

One evening, shortly before leaving the locality in which they had lived so many years, George and his mother walked together to the cemetery where Mr. Weston had been buried, to pay a farewell visit to that hallowed spot. They had been too much reduced in circumstances to have a stone placed over the grave where he lay, and they were talking about it as they journeyed along, saying, how the very first money they could afford should be expended for that purpose. What was their surprise to find a handsome stone raised above the spot, bearing these words:--

Sacred to the Memory of
MR. GEORGE WESTON,
Who departed this life, Feb. 18th, 18-- , aged 46 years.

* * * * *

"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Tears of grateful joy stood in their eyes as they recognized another token of the kind, tender love of Mr. Brunton.

The bereavement and change of fortune were borne by the widow with that fortitude which is only shown by the true Christian. It was hard, very hard, to begin the world again; to be denied the pleasure of allowing George to go to college and complete his studies; and to bear the struggles and inconveniences of poverty. But Mrs. Weston knew that vain regrets would never alter the case; the Lord had given, the Lord had taken away, and from her heart she could say cheerfully, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

George had not been idle. Every hour in which he was not occupied for or with his mother, he was diligently engaged in prosecuting his studies, and preparing himself for the time when he should be able to procure a situation. Mr. Brunton had not been anxious for him to enter upon one at once; he knew how lonely the widow would be without her son, and therefore he did not take any steps to obtain for George a situation. But when a twelvemonth had passed, and the keenness of sorrow had worn off, he mentioned the matter to his friend Mr. Compton; with what success we have seen in the first chapter.

CHAPTER III.

STARTING WELL.

Never did days drag along more heavily than those which elapsed between the interview with Mr. Compton, and the morning when George was to enter upon his new duties. Every day the office was a subject of much conversation; and neither George nor his mother ever seemed to weary in talking over his plans and purposes. George wrote a long letter to Mr. Brunton, telling him of the successful issue of his application to Mr. Compton, and thanking him in the most hearty way for all his kindness. The next day Mr. Brunton replied to George's letter as follows:--

"MY DEAR NEPHEW,

"I am delighted to hear that you have obtained an appointment, and that you seem so well satisfied with your prospects. May you find it to be for your good in every way. Remember, you are going into new scenes, and will be surrounded with many dangers and temptations to which you have hitherto been a stranger. Seek to be strong against everything that is evil; aim at the highest mark, and press towards it. Much of your future depends upon how you begin--therefore begin well; hold yourself aloof from everything with which your conscience tells you you should not be associated, and then all your bright dreams may, I hope, be fully realized.

"I shall hope to be with you for an hour or two on Sunday evening.

"You will have some unavoidable expenses to incur before entering upon your duties, and will require a little pocket-money. Accept the enclosed cheque, with the love of

"Your affectionate Uncle,

"HENRY BRUNTON."

George's eyes sparkled with delight as he read the letter; and found the enclosure to be a cheque for five pounds. This was a great treasure and relief to him, for he had thought many times about his boots, which were down at heel, and his best coat, which shone a good deal about the elbows, and showed symptoms of decay in the neighbourhood of the button-holes.

A new suit of clothes and a pair of boots were therefore purchased at once, and when Sunday morning came, and George dressed himself in them, and stood ready to accompany his mother to the house of God, she thought (although, of course, she did not say so) that she had never seen a more handsome and gentlemanly-looking youth than her son.

"Mother," said George, as they walked along, "what a treat the Sunday will always be now, after being pent up in the office all the week. I shall look forward to it with such pleasure, not only for the sake of its rest, but because I shall have a whole day with you."

"The Sabbath is, indeed, a boon," replied Mrs. Weston, "when it is made a rest-day for the soul, as well as for the body. You remember those lines I taught you, when you were quite another fellow, before you went to school, do you not?--

"A Sunday well spent brings a week of content
And health for the toils of the morrow;
But a Sabbath profaned, whatsoe'er may be gained,
Is a certain forerunner of sorrow."

"Yes, mother, I remember them; and capital lines they are. Dr. Seaward once said, 'Strike the key-note of your tune incorrectly, and the whole song will be inharmonious;' so, if the Sabbath is improperly spent, the week will generally be like it."

That morning the preacher took for his text the beautiful words in Isaiah xli. 10, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed, for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee--yea, I will help thee yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." These words came like the sound of heavenly music into the soul of the widow; and she prayed, with the fervency a mother alone can pray for a beloved and only son, that the time might speedily come when he would be able to appropriate these words, and realize, in the true sense of the term, God as his Father. For George, although he had from early infancy been

brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and had learnt to love holiness from so constantly seeing its beauty exemplified by his parents, had not yet undergone that one great change which creates the soul anew in Christ Jesus.

Mr. Brunton arrived in the evening, just as Mrs. Weston and George were starting out to the second service, and so they all went together to the same place. The minister, an excellent man, who felt the responsibility of his office, and took every opportunity of doing good, was in the habit of giving four sermons a year especially to young men, and it so happened that on this evening one of these discourses was to be delivered. Nothing could have been more appropriate to a young man just starting out in life than his address. The text was taken from those solemn, striking words of the wise man, "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not."

He spoke of the powerful influences continually at work to allure young travellers along life's journey into the snares and pitfalls of sin, and pointed to God's armoury, and the refuge from all the wiles of the adversary.

As the trio sat round the supper-table that evening, discussing the events of the day, George said--

"I feel very glad that this Sunday has come before I go to Mr. Compton's. I thought, when the text was given out this evening, that the minister had prepared his sermon especially for me. I have no doubt all he said was quite true; and so, being prepared, I shall be able to be on my guard against the evils which he says are common to those who make their first start in life."

When Mr. Brunton rose to leave that night, he took George aside; and, laying his hand on his shoulder, said--

"George, I am glad you have got your appointment, my boy; but I am sorry, for some reasons, that it is in Mr. Compton's office, for I have made inquiries about the clerks there, and I regret to find that they are not the set of young men I should have liked you to be with. Now, I want you to make me a promise. If ever you are placed in critical circumstances, or dangers, or difficulties (I say _if_, because I do not know why you should, but _if_ you are), be sure and come to me. Tell me, as you always have done, honestly and openly, your difficulty, and you will always find in me one willing to advise and assist you. Will you promise?"

"With all my heart I will, uncle; and thank you, too, for this, and all your interests on my account."

"Good-bye, then, George. Go on and prosper; and God bless you."

Punctually at nine o'clock on Monday morning, George was at the office. Mr. Sanders, the manager (the old gentleman whom George had seen on his first visit), introduced him to the clerks by saying--

"This is Mr. George Weston, our new junior;" and George, with his face all aglow, made a general bow in return to the salutations which were given him.

"This is to be your seat," said Mr. Sanders; "and that peg is for your hat. And now, as you would, no doubt, like to begin at once, here is a document I want copied."

George was glad to have something to do; he felt all eyes were upon him, and the whispered voices of the clerks rather grated upon his ears. He took up his pen, and began to write; but he found his hand shaky, and he was so confused that, after he had written half a page, and found he had made two or three blunders, he was obliged to take a fresh sheet, and begin again.

"Take your time," said Mr. Sanders, who noticed his dilemma; "you will get on right enough by-and-bye, when you are more accustomed to the place and the work."

George felt relieved by this; and making up his mind to try and forget all around him, he set to work busily again, and in an hour or two had finished the job.

"I have done this, sir," he said, taking it to Mr. Sanders. "What shall I do next?"

"We will just examine it, and then you may take it into Mr. Compton's room. After that you can go and get your dinner, and be back again in an hour."

The document was examined, and, to the surprise of George and Mr. Sanders, not one mistake was found. "Come, this is beginning well," said the manager; "we shall soon make a clerk of you, I see."

When George went into Mr. Compton's room, and presented the papers, he was again rewarded with an encouraging commendation. "This is very well written--very well written indeed, and shows great painstaking," he said.

George felt he could have shaken hands with both principal and manager for those few words. "How cheap a kind word is," he thought, "to those who give it; but it is more precious than gold to the receiver. I like these two men; and, if I can manage it, they shall like me too."

George had not as yet exchanged a word with any of the clerks; but as he was leaving the office to go to dinner, one of them was going out at the same time, on the same errand.

"Well, Mr. Weston, you find it precious dull, don't you, cooped up in your den?"

"Do you mean the office?" said George.

"Yes; what else should I mean?"

"It seems a comfortable office enough," said George, "and not particularly dull; but I have not had sufficient experience in it to judge."

"You see, that old ogre (I beg his pardon, I mean old Sanders) takes jolly good care there shall be no flinching from work while he's there, and it makes a fellow deuced tired, pegging away all day long."

"If this is a specimen of the clerks," thought George, "Uncle Brunton was not far wrong when he said they were not a very good set."

"From what I have seen of Mr. Sanders," he said, "I think him a very nice man! and as for work, I always thought that was what clerks were engaged to do, and therefore it is their duty to do it, whether under the eye of the manager or not."

George got this sentence out with some difficulty. He felt it was an aggressive step, and did not doubt it would go the round of the office as a tale against him.

"Ugh!" said the clerk; "you've got a thing or two to learn yet, I see. You must surely be fresh and green from the country; but such notions soon die out. I don't like to be personal though, so we'll change the subject. Where are you going to dine? Most of our chaps patronize the King's Head--first-rate place; get anything you like in two twinklings of a lamb's tail. I'm going there now; will you go? By the way, I should have told you before this that my name is Williams."

"I suppose, Mr. Williams,' the King's Head is a tavern? If so, I prefer a coffee-house; but thank you, notwithstanding, for your offer."

"By George! that's a rum start. Our chaps all hate coffee-shops, with the exception of young Hardy, and he's coming round to our tastes now. You can get a good feed at the King's Head--stunning tackle in the shape of beer, and meet a decent set of fellows who know how to crack a joke at table; whereas, if you go to a coffee-shop, you have an ugly slice of meat set before you, a jorum of tea leaves and water, or some other mess, and a disagreeable set of people around. Now, which is best?"

"Your description is certainly unfavourable in the latter case; but I do not suppose all coffeehouses are alike, and therefore I shall try one to-day. Good morning."

George soon found a nice-looking quiet place where he could dine, and felt sure he had no need to go to taverns for better accommodation.

When he returned to the office, at two o'clock, Mr. Sanders was absent, and the clerks were busily engaged, not at work, but in conversation. Mr. Williams was the principal speaker, and seemed to have something very choice to communicate. George made no doubt that he was the subject

of conversation, for he had caught one or two words as he entered, which warranted the supposition. He had nothing to do until Mr. Sanders returned; this was an opportunity, therefore, for Mr. Williams to make himself officious.

"Mr. Weston," he said, "allow me to do the honours of the office by introducing you, in a more definite manner than that old ----, I mean than Mr. Sanders did this morning. This gentleman is Mr. Lawson, this is Mr. Allwood, this is Mr. Malcolm, and this my young friend, Mr. Charles Hardy, who is of a serious turn of mind, and is meditating entering the ministry, or the undertaking line."

A laugh at Hardy's expense was the result of this attempt at jocularity on the part of Mr. Williams. George hardly knew how to acknowledge these introductions; but, turning to Charles Hardy, he said,--

"As Mr. Williams has so candidly mentioned your qualities, Mr. Hardy, perhaps you will favour me with a description of his."

Hardy rose from his seat, for up to this time he had been engaged in writing, and, in a tone of mock gravity, replied,

"This is Mr. Williams, who lives at the antipodes of everything that is quiet or serious, whose mission to the earth seems expressly to turn everything he touches into a laugh. He is not a 'youth to fortune and to fame unknown,' for in the archives of the King's Head his name is emblazoned in imperishable characters."

"Well said, Hardy!" said one or two at once. "Now, Williams, you are on your mettle, old boy; stand true to your colours, and transmute the sentence into a joke in self-defence."

Williams was on the point of replying when Mr. Sanders entered. In an instant all the clerks pretended to be up to their eyes in business; each had his book or papers to hand as if by magic; whether upside down or not was immaterial.

But George Weston stood where he was; he could not condescend to so mean an imposition, and he felt pleased to see that Charles Hardy, unlike the others, made no attempt to hide the fact that he had been engaged in conversation, instead of continuing at his work.

At six o'clock the day's duties were over; and George felt not a little pleased when the hour struck, and Mr. Sanders told him he could go. Hardy was leaving just at the same time, and so they went out together.

"Are you going anywhere in my direction?" said Hardy; "I live at Canonbury."

"Indeed!" replied George; "I'm glad to hear that, for I live at Islington, close by you. If you are willing, we will bear one another company, for I want to ask you one or two questions;" and taking Hardy's arm, the two strolled homewards together.

Now George would never have thought of walking arm in-arm with Mr. Williams, or any of the other clerks; but, from the first time he saw Hardy, and noticed his quiet, gentlemanly manners, he felt sure he should like him. Hardy, too, had evidently taken a fancy to George; and therefore both felt pleased that accident had brought them together. Accident? No, that is a wrong word; whenever a heart feels that there is another heart beating like its own, and those two hearts go out one towards the other, until they become knit together in the bonds of friendship, there is something more than accident in that.

"How long have you been in Mr. Compton's office?" said George, as they walked along,

"Nearly two years," he replied; "I went there as soon as I left school. I was then about seventeen years old; and there I have been ever since."

"Then you are my senior by two years," said George. "I left school a year ago, and this is my first situation. How do you like the office?"

"Do you mean my particular seat, the clerks, or the duties, or all combined?"

"I should like to know how you like the whole combined."

"I prefer my desk to yours, because I sit next to Mr. Malcolm, who is one of the steadiest and most respectable clerks in the office; and therefore I am not subject to so much annoyance as you will be, seated next to that empty-headed Williams, and coarse low-minded Lawson. I do not really like any of the clerks; there are none of them the sort of young men I should choose as companions. As to the duties, they are agreeable enough, and I have nothing to find fault with on that score."

"I tell you candidly," said George, "I am not prepossessed in favour of the clerks; they are far too 'fast' a set to please me; but I am very glad, for my own sake, that you are in the office, Mr. Hardy."

"Why?"

"Because, although we are almost strangers at present, I know I shall find in you some one who will be companionable. You don't seem very thick with the others; you don't join with them in that mean practice of shirking work directly Mr. Sanders's back is turned; and you don't, from what I have heard, approve of the society at the King's Head, in which the others seem to take so much delight. Now, in these points, I think, our tastes are similar."

"Ah! Mr. Weston," said Hardy, "you will find, as I have done, that amongst such a set we are obliged to allow a great many things we do not approve. But I'm very glad you have come amongst us; unity is strength, you know, and two can make a better opposition than one. Now, will you let me give you a hint?"

"Certainly," said George.

"Be on your guard with Lawson and Williams; they are two dangerous young men, and can do no end of mischief, because they are double-faced--sneaking sometimes, and bullying at others. I don't know whether you have heard that you are filling a vacancy caused by one of our clerks leaving the office in disgrace. It is not worth while my telling you the story now, but that poor chap would never have left in the way he did, had it not been for Lawson and Williams."

"Many thanks, Mr. Hardy, for your information and advice, upon which I will endeavour to act. And now, as our roads lay differently, we must say good evening."

"Adieu, then, till to-morrow," said Hardy. "By-the-bye, I pass this road in the morning, at half-past eight; if you are here we will walk to the office together."

It took George the whole of the evening to give his mother a full account of the day's proceedings; there were so many questions to ask on her part, and so many descriptions to give on his, and such a number of events occurred during the day, that it seemed as if he had at least a week's experience to narrate.

"I like Hardy, mother," said George, once or twice during the evening; "he is such a thorough open-hearted fellow, and I know we shall get along together capitally."

"I hope so, my boy," said his mother; "but be very careful how you form any other friendships."

When Mrs. Western retired to her room for the night, it was not to sleep. She felt anxious and uneasy about George; she thought of him as the loving, gentle child, the merry, light-hearted boy, and the manly, conscientious youth. Then she thought of the future. How would he stand against the evil influences surrounding him? Would his frank, ingenuous manner change, and the confidence he always reposed in her cease? Would he be led away by the gay and thoughtless young men with whom he would be associated?

Tears gathered in the widow's eyes, and many a sigh sounded in that quiet room; but Mrs. Weston had a Friend at hand, to whom she could go and pour out all her anxieties. She would cast her burden on Him, for she knew He cared for her. As she knelt before the mercy-seat, these were her prayers:--

"Lord, create in him a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within him. May he remember Thee in the days of his youth. Heavenly Father, lead him not into temptation, but deliver him from evil Guide him by Thy counsel, and lead him in the paths of righteousness, for Thy Name's sake."

CHAPTER IV.

MEETING A SCHOOL-FELLOW.

Six months passed rapidly away. George continued to give satisfaction to Mr. Compton, soon learnt the office routine, and earned the warmest expressions of approbation from Mr. Sanders, who said he was the best junior clerk he ever remembered to have entered that office.

George had carefully guarded against forming any kind of intimacy with the other clerks; he had declined to have more to say to them during office hours than possible, and when business was over he purposely shunned them. But a strong friendship had sprung up between him and Charles Hardy; every morning they came to the city together, and returned in company in the evening. Sometimes George would spend an evening at the house of Hardy's parents, and Hardy, in like manner, would occasionally spend an evening with George.

Williams and Lawson had, as Hardy predicted, been a source of great annoyance to George. He was constantly obliged to bear their ridicule because he would not conform to their habits, and sometimes the insults he received were almost beyond his power of endurance. He and Hardy received the name of the "Siamese youths," and were generally greeted with such salutations as "How d'ye do? Is mamma pretty well?"--or something equally galling. But George bore it all with exemplary patience, and he did not doubt that after a while they would grow tired of annoying him. At all events, he felt certain some new policy would be adopted by them; for he had so risen in the estimation of his employer, who began to repose confidence in him, and entrust him with more important matters than he allowed the others to interfere with, that George anticipated the time when the clerks would either be glad to curry favour with him, or at least have to acknowledge that he was regarded more highly than they were.

So matters went on. Mrs. Weston was full of joy as she saw how well George had kept his resolutions, and full of hope that he would continue as he had begun.

Mr. Brunton had given him many kind encouragements during this time, and had felt himself well rewarded for all his trouble on George's behalf by hearing from Mr. Compton of the satisfaction his services had given.

And now an event occurred, simple and unimportant in itself, and yet it was one that affected the whole of George's after-life.

One evening, as he was leaving the office, and had just turned into Fleet-street, a nice-looking, fashionably-dressed young man came running up, and, clapping him on the shoulder, exclaimed,

"What! George Weston, my old pippin, who ever thought of turning you up in London!"

"Harry Ashton! my old school-chum, how are you?" and the two friends shook hands with a heartiness that surprised the passers-by.

"Where ever have you been to, all these long years, George?" said Aston; "only fancy, we have never seen each other since that day we were playing hockey at dear old Dr. Seaward's, and you were hastily called away to London. The Doctor told us the sad news, and we all felt for you deeply, old fellow; in fact I never recollect the place having been so gloomy before or since."

"It was a sad time for me," said George; "and after that I lived at home for a twelvemonth. Then I got an appointment in an office in Falcon-court, and have held it just six months. Now, tell me where you have sprung from, and where you have been since I last saw you?"

"I stayed only six months longer at Dr. Seaward's and was then articled to a surveyor in the Strand, with whom I have been nearly a year, and now I am bound for my lodgings, and you must come with me."

"You had better come with me," said George; "my mother will be so pleased to welcome an old school-fellow of mine, and she is not altogether a stranger to you."

"Thank you, old fellow," replied Ashton; "I shall be very glad to accept your invitation some other night; but, after our long separation, we want to have a quiet, confidential chat over old times together, and I must introduce you to my crib. I am a bachelor--all alone in my glory. The old folks still live in the country, and I boarded at first in a family; but that that was terribly slow work, and since that time I have hung out on my own hook. So come along, George; I really can't hear any excuse."

George hesitated only a moment; he had never spent an evening from home without first acquainting his mother; but this was an unusual event, and he was so anxious to hear about Dr. Seaward, and talk over old school days, the temptation was irresistible.

Harry Ashton called a cab, much to George's surprise, into which they jumped; and were not very long in getting into the Clapham road, where they alighted before a large, nice looking house.

"This is the crib," said Ashton, as he ushered George into a large parlour, handsomely furnished with everything contributing to comfort and amusement. "Now, make yourself at home. Here are some cigars (producing a box of Havannahs), and here (opening a cellaret) is bottled beer and wine; which shall it be?"

"As to smoking, that is a bad habit, or an art (which you like) I have never yet practised," said George; "but I will join you in a glass of wine just to toast 'Dr. Seaward and our absent friends in the school.'"

Then the two school friends fell into conversation. Many and many a

happy recollection came into their minds, and one long yarn was but the preface to another.

"Come, George, fill up your glass," said Ashton repeatedly; but George declined.

Two or three hours slipped rapidly away, and then George rose to leave. "Not a bit of it, George," said Ashton; "we must have some supper and discuss present times yet. I have not heard particulars of what you are doing, or how you are getting on, and you only know I'm here, without any of the history about it."

So George yielded: how could he help it? Harry Ashton had become his bosom-chum during the five years he had been at school, and all the old happy memories of those days were again fresh upon him.

"Now, George, tell your story first, and then mine shall follow." Then George narrated all the leading circumstances which had attended his life, from the time he left school up to that very evening, and a long story it was.

"Now," said Ashton, "for mine. When you left Folkestone I got up to your place at the head of the school, and there I held on till I left. Six months after you left, the holidays came, and I came up to town. I spent a few days with Mr. Ralston, an old friend of the family, and one of the first engineers and surveyors in London. He took a liking to me, offered to take me into his office, wrote to the governor (I know you don't like that term, though--I mean my father), proposed a sum as premium, arrangements were made; and, instead of returning to school, I came to London and commenced learning the arts and mysteries of a profession. I had only been with Mr. Ralston two or three months, when one morning my father came into the office, out of wind with excitement, and said, 'Harry, I have got sad and joyful, and wonderful news for you! Poor old Mr. Cornish is dead; the will has been opened, and--make up your mind for a surprise--the bulk of his property is left to you.' I was thunderstruck. I knew the old gentleman would leave me something, but I did not know that he had quarrelled with his relatives, and therefore appropriated to me the share originally intended for them. So, you see, I have stepped into luck's way. I am allowed an income now which amounts to something like two hundred a year, as I shall not come into my rights till I am twenty-one, and how I am not nineteen; so I have a long time to wait, you see, which is rather annoying. I took this crib, and have managed to enjoy my existence pretty well, I can assure you. Sometimes I run down into the country to spend a week or two with the old folks, and sometimes they come up and see me."

"Don't you find it rather dull, living here alone, though?" said George.

"Dull? far from it. I have a good large circle of friends, who like to come round here and spend a quiet evening; and there are no end of amusements in this great city, so that no one need never be dull. Besides, if I am alone, I am not without friends, you see,"--pointing to a well-stocked book case.

"I have been running my eye over them, Harry. There are some very nice books; but your tastes are changed since I knew you last, or you would never waste your time over all this lot here which seem to have been best used. I mean the 'Wandering Jew,' 'Ernest Maltravers,' and the like."

"I won't attempt to defend myself, George; but when I was at school, I did as school-boys did: now I have come to London, I do as the Londoners do. I know there is an absence of anything like reason in this, but I am not much thrown amongst reasoners. But, to change the subject; now you have found me out, George, I do hope you will very often chum with me. I shall enjoy going about with you better than with anybody else; and as we know one another so well, we shall soon have tastes and habits in common again, as we used to have."

Presently the clock struck. George started up in surprise. "What! twelve o'clock! impossible. It never can be so late as that?"

"It is, though," said Ashton, "but what of that? you don't surely call twelve o'clock bad hours for once in a way?"

"No, not for once in a way," replied George; "but I have never kept my mother up so late before. Good-bye, old fellow. Promise to come and see me some night this week. There is my address." And so saying, George ran out into the street and made his way towards Islington.

That was an anxious night for Mrs. Weston. "What can have happened?" she asked herself a hundred times. Fortunately, Mr. Brunton called, and he assisted to while away the time.

"George does not often stay out of an evening, does he?" he asked.

"No, never," replied Mrs. Weston; "unless it is with his friend, Charles Hardy, and then I always know where they are, and what they are doing. But something extraordinary must have happened to-night, and I feel very anxious to know what it is. Not that I think he is anywhere he ought not to be. I feel sure he is not," continued Mrs. Weston confidently; "but what it is that has detained him, I am altogether at a loss to guess."

"Well, I will not leave you till he comes home," said Mr. Brunton.

It was one o'clock before George arrived; it was too late to get an omnibus, and a cab, he thought, was altogether out of the question; therefore he had to walk the whole distance--or rather run, for he was as anxious now to get home as they were to see him.

He was very much surprised, and, if it must be confessed, rather vexed on some accounts, to find Mr. Brunton waiting up for him with his mother.

His explanation of what had happened, told in his merry, ingenuous way, at once dissipated any anxiety they had felt.

"I recollect Harry Ashton well," said Mrs. Weston. "Dr. Seaward pointed him out to me, the first time I went to see you at Folkestone, as being one of his best scholars; and he came home once with you in the holidays to spend a day or two with us, did he not?"

"That is the same, mother, and a better-hearted fellow it would be hard to find."

"There is only one disadvantage that I see in your having him as an intimate friend," said Uncle Brunton, "and that is, he is now very differently situated in position to you as regards wealth, and you might find him a companion more liable to lead you into expense than any of your other friends, because I know what a proud fellow you are, George," he said, laughingly, "you like to do as your friends do, and would not let them incur expense on your account unless you could return their compliment. But I will not commence a moral discourse to-night--it is time all good folks should be in bed."

All the next day George was thinking over the events of the previous evening; he was pleased to have found out Harry Ashton, and thought he would be just the young man he wanted for a companion. Then he compared their different modes of life--Ashton living in luxuriant circumstances, without anybody or anything to interfere with his enjoyment, and he, obliged to live very humbly and carefully in order to make both ends meet; and then came a new feeling, that of restraint.

"There is Ashton," he thought, "can go out when he likes and where he likes, without its being necessary to say where he is going or what he is going to do, and he can come in at night without being obliged to account for all his actions like a child. If I happen to stay out, there is Uncle Brunton and my mother in a great state of excitement about me, which I don't think is right. I really do not wonder that the clerks have made me a laughing-stock. All this while I have lived in London I have seen nothing; have not been to any of the places of amusement; and have not been a bit like the young men with whom I get thrown into contact. I think Ashton is right, after all, in saying that when he was at school he did as school-boys did, and when he came to London he did as the Londoners do. Far be it from me to be undutiful to those who care for me; but I think, as a young man, I do owe a duty to myself, different altogether from that which belonged to me as a schoolboy."

These were all new thoughts to George: he had never felt or even thought of restraint before; he had never even expressed a wish to do as other young men did, in wasting precious time on useless amusements; he had always looked forward to an evening at home with pleasure, and had never felt the least inclination to wander forth in search of recreation elsewhere. Nay, he had always condemned it; and when Lawson or Williams, or any of the other clerks, had proposed such a thing to him, he never minded bearing their ridicule in declining.

And here was George's danger. He was upon his guard with his fellow-clerks, and was able to keep his resolution not to adopt their

ideas, nor fall into their ways and habits; but when those very evils he condemned in them were presented to him in a different form by Harry Ashton, his old friend and school-fellow--leaving the principle the same, and only the practice a little altered--he was off his guard; and the habits he regarded with dislike in Williams and Lawson, he was beginning secretly to admire in Ashton.

As he walked home that evening with Hardy he gave him a long description of his meeting with Ashton, and all that happened during his interview and upon his return home.

"Now, Hardy," said George, "which do you think is really preferable--Harry Ashton's life or ours? We never go out anywhere; and, for the matter of that, might as well be living in monasteries, as far as knowing what is going on in the world is concerned."

"For my own part, Weston," said Hardy, "I would rather be as I am. Your friend is surrounded with infinitely greater temptations than we are, from the fact of his living as he does without any control. He is evidently free from his parents, and although he is old enough to take care of himself, still there is a certain restraint felt under a parent's roof which is very desirable."

"Quite true," said George; "but that involves a point which has been perplexing me all day. Should we, after we have arrived at a certain age, acknowledge a parent's control as we did when we were mere school-boys? I do not mean are we to cease to honour them, because that we cannot do while God's commandment lasts; but are we, as Williams says, always to go in leading-strings, or are we at liberty to think and act for ourselves?"

"That depends a good deal on the way in which we wish to think and act. For instance, my parents object to Sunday travelling and Sunday visiting. Now, while I am living with them, I feel it would not be right for me to do either of these things--even though as a matter of principle I might not see any positive wrong in them--because it would bring me into opposition with my parents. So, in spending evenings away from home, I know it would be contrary to their wish, and it is right to try and prevent our opinions clashing."

"I agree with you, partly, Hardy; but only partly. We must study our parents' opinions in the main, but not in points of detail. Suppose I want to attend a course of lectures, for example, which would take me from home sometimes in the evening; and my mother objects to my spending evenings from home, although the study might be advantageous to me--then I think I should be at liberty to adhere to my own opinion; if not, I should be under the same restraint I was as a child. It is right and natural that parents should feel desirous to know what associations their sons are forming, and what are their habits, and all that sort of thing; but I am inclined to think it is not right for a parent to exercise so strong a control as to say, 'So-and-so shall be your companion;' and, 'You may go to this place, but you may not go to that.'"

"Well, Weston, your digestion must be out of order, or you are a little bilious, or something; for I never heard you talk like this before. I have told you, confidentially sometimes, that I have wanted to rebel against the wishes of my parents on some points, and you have always counselled me, like a sage, grey-headed father, to give up my desire. But now you turn right round, and place me in the position of the parent, and you the rebellious son. I recommend, therefore, that you take two pills, for I am sure bile is at the bottom of this; and then I will feel your pulse upon this point again."

Mrs. Weston noticed a difference in George that evening. He seemed as if he had got something upon his mind which was perplexing him. He was not so cheerful and merry as usual, but his mother attributed it partly to his late hours, followed by a hard day's work, and therefore she said nothing to him about it.

A day or two elapsed, and George was still brooding upon the same subject. He did not know that the great tempter was weaving a subtle net around him, to lure him into the broad road which leadeth to destruction. He tried a hundred times to fight against the strange influence he felt upon him; but he did not fight with the right weapons, and therefore he failed. Had the tempter suggested to him that, as he was a young man, he should do as his fellow-clerks, or even Ashton did, and have his way in all things, he would have seen the temptation; but it came altogether in a different way. The evil voice said, "You are under restraint. Ask any young man of your own age, and he will tell you so. It is high time you should unloose yourself from apron-strings." And this idea of restraint was preying upon him, and he could not throw it off. George was anxious to do the right, but did not know how to fight against the wrong. Conscience whispered to him, "Do you remember that motto your dying father gave you, 'For me to live is Christ?'" George replied, "Yes, I remember it; and it is still my desire to follow it." Conscience said again, "Do you recollect that sermon you heard, and the resolutions you made, 'My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not?'" And he answered, "I remember it well; but I am not aware that any are endeavouring to entice me."

This was the effect of the unconscious influence of Harry Ashton. He had unknowingly fanned a latent spark into a flame, which, unless checked, would consume all those high and praiseworthy resolutions which George had formed, and carefully kept for years. He had cast a shadow over the landscape of his friend's well-being, which made the sign-posts pointing "upward and onward" almost indistinct. He had breathed into the atmosphere a subtle malaria, and George had caught the disease. The little leaven was now mixed with his life, which would leaven the whole. The genus of that moral consumption, which, unless cured by the Great Physician, ends in death, had been sown, and were now taking root.

George was unconscious of any foreign influence working upon him--he could not see that Ashton had in any way exerted a power over him; nor in the new and undefined feelings which had taken possession of him could he recognise the presence of evil. He had consulted conscience,

and, he fancied, had satisfactorily met the warnings of its voice.

But he had not gone to that high and sure source of strength which can alone make a way of escape from all temptations; he had not obtained that armour of righteousness which is the only defence against the fiery darts of the wicked one; he had not that faith, in the power of which alone Satan can be resisted; and therefore his eyes were holden so that he could not see the snares which the subtle foe was laying around him, nor could he, in his own strength, bear up against the strong tide which was threatening to overwhelm him.

CHAPTER V.

A FARCE.

Harry Ashton kept his promise, and went one evening that week to see George at Islington. Hardy had been invited to meet him; and the three friends, as they kept up a perfect rattle of conversation, interspersed with many crossfired jokes, made the merriest and happiest little party that could be imagined.

Mrs. Weston was very much pleased with Ashton--his refined thought and gentlemanly address, joined with an open-hearted candour and a fund of humour which sparkled in every sentence, made it impossible for any one not to like him. Charles Hardy thought he had never met a more entertaining companion than Ashton; Ashton thought Hardy was an intelligent, agreeable fellow; and George declared to his mother that, if he had had the pick of all the young men in London, he could not have found two nicer fellows.

A hundred topics were discoursed upon during the evening, in which Ashton generally took the lead, and showed himself to be very well informed on all ordinary subjects. Incidentally the theatre was mentioned.

"Have you seen that new piece at the Lyceum?" said Ashton. "It is really a very capital thing."

"No," said George. "I have never been to a theatre."

"Nor I," said Hardy.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Weston.

"Well, that is really very extraordinary," said Ashton; "I thought almost everybody went to a theatre at some time or other. But perhaps you have some objection?"

"I have," said Mrs. Weston. "I think there is a great deal of evil

learnt there, and very little good, if any. It is expensive; and it leads into other bad habits."

"Those last objections cannot be gainsaid," said Ashton; "but they equally apply to all amusements, and therefore, by that rule, all amusements are bad."

"But not in an equal degree with that of the theatre," George remarked; "because other amusements do not possess such an infatuation. For my own part, I should not mind going to a concert; but I very much disapprove of the theatre, and should never hesitate to decline going there."

"Yours is not a good argument, George. You have never been to the theatre, you say, and yet you disapprove of it. Are you right in pronouncing such an opinion, which cannot be the result of your own investigation?"

"I think I am," replied George; "I can adopt the opinions of those whom experience has instructed in the matter, and in whom I can rely with implicit confidence. If a man goes through a dangerous track, and falls into a bog, I should be willing to admit the track was dangerous, and avoid the bog, without going in to prove the former traveller was right; and this applies to going to theatres."

"No, George; there is your error. There would be no two opinions about the bog; but suppose you go for a tour to the Pyrenees, and, from prejudice or some other cause, come back disgusted. You warn me not to go, telling me I shall be wasting my time, and find nothing interesting to reward my trouble in the journey. But Hardy goes the same tour, comes home delighted, and says, 'Go to the Pyrenees by all means; it is a glorious place, the most pleasant in the whole world for a tour.' To decide the question, I read two books; one agrees with you, and the other with Hardy. How can I arrive at an opinion unless I go myself, and see what it is like? So it is with the theatre: some say it is the great teacher of morals, others that it is the most wicked and hurtful place. Therefore I think every one should form his own opinion from his own experience."

"You may be right," said George, waveringly. "I am not clear upon the subject; but I do not think, even if I were to form an opinion in the way you prescribe, that I should ever choose the theatre as a place of amusement."

"Then what is your favourite amusement?" asked Ashton.

"To come home and read, or spend a social evening with a friend," George answered.

"Then I know what will suit you all to pieces," said Ashton; "and your friend Hardy too. I am a member of a literary institution. It is a first-rate place--the best in London. There are lectures and classes, and soirees, a debating society, a good library, and rooms for

chess-playing and that sort of thing. Now, you really must join it; it will be so very nice for us to have a regular place of meeting; and, besides that, we can combine study with amusement. What do you say, Mrs. Weston?"

"I cannot see any objection to literary institutions," said Mrs. Weston; "but I have always considered them better suited to young men who are away from home, than for those who have comfortable homes in which to spend their evenings. You speak about having a regular place of meeting. I shall always be very pleased to see you and Mr. Hardy here, as often as ever you can manage to spend an evening with us."

"Many thanks for your kindness, Mrs. Weston," returned Ashton; "but it would not be right for us to trespass on your good nature. Now I will give you and your friend a challenge, George," he continued. "Next Monday, the first debate of the season comes off; will you allow me to introduce you to the institution on that evening?--it is a member's privilege."

"I shall be very pleased to join you, then," said George. "What say you, Hardy?"

"I accept the invitation, with thanks," replied Hardy.

On Monday night, as George and Hardy journeyed towards the place of meeting, they discussed the question of joining the institution.

"If you will, I will," said Hardy. "My parents do not much like the idea; but, as you said the other evening, 'we must not allow ourselves to be controlled like mere children.'"

"I do think we really require a little recreation after business hours; and we can obtain none better than that of an intellectual kind, such as is found at literary institutions. The new term has only just commenced; so we may as well be enrolled as members at once."

"I wish the institution was a little nearer home," said Hardy, "for it will be so late of an evening for us to be out. However, we need not always attend, nor is it necessary we should very often be late. Have you had any difficulty in obtaining Mrs. Weston's consent to your joining?"

"None at all; she prefers my attending an institution of this kind to any other, although probably she would be better pleased if I did not join one at all. But, as Ashton says, we really must live up to the times, and know something of what is going on in the world around us. Did you not notice, the other evening, how Ashton could speak upon every subject brought on the carpet? My mother said, 'What a remarkably agreeable young man he is! he has evidently seen a good deal of society;' and I think the two things are inseparable--to be agreeable in society, one must mix more with it."

Ashton was punctual to his appointment; and all were at the institution

just as the members were assembling for the debate. George was surprised to find how many of the young men knew Ashton, and he admired the ease and elegance of his friend in acknowledging the greetings which met him on every hand.

"I won't bore you with introductions to-night," he said, "except to just half-a-dozen fellows in particular, who, I am sure, you will like to know; and we can all sit together and compare opinions during the debate."

The friends were accordingly introduced; and as the proceedings of the evening went on, and all waxed warm upon the subject under discussion, the party which Ashton had drawn together soon became known to one another, and were on terms of conversational acquaintance.

The meeting separated at ten o'clock, and then George and Hardy essayed to bid good-night to their friends, and make their way at once towards Islington.

"Nonsense," said Ashton; "I want you to come with me to a nice quiet place I know, close by, and have a bit of supper and a chat over all that has been said, and then I will walk part of the way home with you."

"No, not to-night, Ashton; it is quite late enough already; and it will be past eleven o'clock before we get home as it is."

"What say you, Hardy? Can you persuade our sage old friend to abandon his ten o'clock habits for one night?" asked Ashton.

"I do not like to establish a bad precedent," said Hardy; "and as we have to-night joined the institution, I think we should make a rule to start off home as soon as we leave the meetings, because we have some distance to go, and bad hours, you know, interfere with business."

"I did not expect you to make a rule to keep bad hours," said Ashton; "but every rule has an exception--"

"And therefore it will not do to commence with the exception; so good-bye, till we meet again on Wednesday."

Three nights a-week there was something going on at the institution sufficiently attractive to draw George and Hardy there. One evening a lecture, another the discussion class, and the third an elocution class, or more frequently that was resigned in favour of chess. From meeting the same young men, night after night, a great number of new acquaintanceships were formed, and George would never have spent an evening at home, had he accepted the invitations which were frequently being given him; but he had made a compact with himself, that he would never be out more than three evenings a week, and would devote the remainder to the society of his mother. A certain little voice did sometimes say to him, "Is it quite right and kind of you, George, to leave your mother so often? Do you not think it must be rather lonely for her, sometimes, without you?" And George would answer to the voice,

"Mother would never wish to stand between me and my improvement. Besides, she has many friends who visit her, and with whom she visits; and few young men of my age give their mothers more than three evenings of their society a week."

One evening, as George and Hardy were entering the institution, Harry Ashton came up to them, and said,--

"I have just had some tickets sent me for the Adelphi. There is nothing going on here worth staying for, so I shall go. Dixon will make one, and you and Hardy must make up the quartette."

"Dixon going?" asked George; "why, I thought he was such a sedate fellow, and never went to anything of the sort!"

"Neither does he, as a rule; but he has never been to the Adelphi, and he wants to go. Will you accompany us?"

"No, thank you," said George; "I told you once I did not like theatres; perhaps you recollect we discussed the point one evening?"

"We did, and you said you had never been to a theatre: you disapproved of them, without ever having had an opportunity of judging whether they were good or bad places. Now, take the opportunity."

"I am not anxious to form a judgment; and I so dislike all the associations of a theatre that it would be no pleasure for me to go."

"Complimentary, certainly!" laughed Ashton. "But I will grant you this much--there are bad associations connected with the theatres, and this is the stronghold of objectors; but we are four staid sober fellows, we shall go to our box without any bother, sit and see the play without exchanging a word with anybody beyond our own party, and then leave as soon as the performance is over. You had better say you will go, eh?"

"No, it would be very late before I got home," said George: "and I do not like keeping my mother up, more particularly as I was so very late the other evening. But what do you say, Hardy?"

"I don't know what to say," said Hardy. "I did once say to myself I would never go to a theatre; but I am not sure that there is any moral obligation why I should keep my word, when the compact rests only with myself. I have not time to consult Paley, and so I put the question to you--Can I go, seeing I have said to myself I will not?"

"Arrange it in this way," said Ashton; "both of you go, and when you get there, if you decide you have done wrong, then leave at once; or if you find that your consciences are in durance vile, and you have not patience or sufficient interest to stay and see the play out, go, and I will excuse you then with all my heart; but I won't excuse your not going. Now is your time to decide; for here comes Dixon, true to his appointment."

"I suppose you have got your party complete, Ashton?" he said; "and if so, we had better start at once, or the play will have begun before we get there."

George pondered no longer. "Suppose we try it, Hardy, on Ashton's plan," said he; "I don't see any harm in that, do you?"

"No, I think that is the best way in which the case can be put," he replied; "and I don't see that any harm can possibly come of it."

Away went the party, full of high spirits, bent upon amusement. But George felt a certain uneasy something, which tried to make him feel less pleased with himself than usual, and his laugh was at first forced and unnatural; there was not the same joyousness there would have been had he been starting on some recreation which he knew would be approved by parent and friends, and his own conscience. Ashton noticed he did not seem to be quite at ease; and therefore he brought all his humour into play to provoke hilarity. By the time they arrived at the theatre, that love of novelty and excitement which is so natural to young people completely overcame all other feelings, and the sight of the crowds flocking into all parts of the house was now an irresistible temptation to follow in too.

They were shown into a very comfortable box, commanding a good view of the whole of the theatre. The thrilling strains of music issuing from the orchestra, the dazzling lights, and the large assembly of elegantly dressed ladies in the boxes, a mass of people in the pit, and tiers of heads in the galleries, filled George with excitement. He who a little while before had been the dullest of the party, was now the gayest of the gay; he was lost in astonishment at all he saw and heard, dazzled with the brilliancy of the scene, and abandoned to all the enjoyments of the hour.

The performances that evening consisted of a farce, the comedy of the "Serious Family," and a ballet. When the curtain rose, and the farce commenced, George entered heart and soul into the spirit of the performance; laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks at the dilemmas of an unlucky wight who acted a prominent part, and stamped applause in favour of a young lady who tried in every way to defend this unfortunate individual from his persecutors.

When it was over, Ashton turned to George, and said--

"Well, Weston, so much for the farce; now, if you think it is objectionable, off you go, old fellow, and we will forgive you."

"No," said George; "I think that farce was capital, and I shall stay now and see the end. I am not surprised people like the theatre--I never enjoyed a laugh more in my life. But there is one thing I have not liked. That hero of the piece did not scruple to use language for which he would have been kicked out of any respectable private house--and yet there are respectable people here, old and young, all listening and seeming to enjoy it. That shows there is insincerity somewhere; either

these people hush their sensitive feelings in the playhouse, or they are hypocrites at home, and profess to be much more refined than they really are."

"You evidently don't understand plays yet," said Ashton; "that man depicts a certain style of life, and he must be true to it. If he enacts the part of a costermonger, he must swear and talk slang, and commit crimes, if need be, or anything suiting the character he assumes; or else the thing would be absurd, and the gentleman and costermonger would be both alike."

"The theatre must be a 'great teacher of morals,' then, if we come here to be initiated into the vices of costermongers," said George, rather sarcastically.

"George," whispered Hardy, "we've got into a mess; look down in the pit--Williams and Lawson are there. They have recognized us, and are nodding--shall we nod?"

"Yes," said George, and he nodded; but his face was red as crimson. "I would not have had Lawson and Williams see us here for the world," he whispered to Hardy; "but it's too late now--as you say, we've got into a mess."

Just then the curtain rose again, and the play of the "Serious Family," commenced.

The plot of the piece is this:--

Mr. Abinadab Sleek and Lady Creamly are two hypocrites, introduced as ordinary specimens of Christians. They are living in the house of their daughter and son-in-law (Mr. and Mrs. Charles Torrens), over whom they exercise a stern and despotic control. Mr. Charles Torrens, "for the sake of peace and quietness," agrees to all the solemnities opposed upon him; and is willing to pass himself off in Christian circles as a co-worker with Mr. Abinadab Sleek. In his heart he detests everything like seriousness; and whenever an opportunity occurs, on the pretext of going into the country, indulges in the gaities and vices of London fashionable life. He is visited by an old friend, Captain Murphy Maguire, who persuades him to renounce boldly the sanctimonious customs of the "Serious Family," and enjoy with unshackled freedom the pleasures of the world. To this he consents; but he has not courage to alter the family customs. Captain Maguire aids his plans by convincing Mrs. C. Torrens that unless she provides in her home those amusements which are found in the world, her husband will prefer the world to his home. A conspiracy is laid to oppose the religious tyranny of Mr. Abinadab Sleek, the result of which is, that a ball is given by Mr. Torrens, assisted by his wife, who, throwing off her former profession of Christianity, becomes a woman of the world. On all this their future happiness as man and wife is made to hinge; and when, through the flimsy plot of the piece, the tableau arrives, the curtain drops, leaving the younger members of the "Serious Family" whirling in the giddy dance, commencing the new era of domestic happiness.

Throughout the play, Scripture is quoted and ridiculed, religion is made contemptible, and vice under the name of "geniality, openheartedness, and merriment," is made to appear the one thing necessary to constitute real happiness.

George followed the play through all its shifting scenes; now laughed, now sighed, now felt the hot blush of shame as he listened to the atrocious mockery of everything which, from the time he had been an infant on his mother's knee, he had been taught to regard as good and pure. He was heated to indignation when the audience applauded the base character of Maguire, and shuddered when as he thought that a masked hypocrite was brought before the world as the type of a Christian, and that a "Serious Family" was only another name for an unhappy, canting set of ignorant people.

And yet George did not leave the theatre. He was hurt, wounded to the heart by what he saw and heard, felt he would have given the world to have stood up in the box, and have told the audience that the play was a libel upon everything sacred and solemn; but he stayed and saw it out, rivetted by that strange, unholy infatuation which has been the bane of so many.

"Let us go now, Hardy," he said, as the curtain dropped; "you do not care to see the ballet, do you?"

"Oh, in for a penny, in for a pound. While we are here, we may as well see all that is to be seen. I won't ask you how you liked the comedy. I want to see something lively now, to remove the disagreeable impressions it has left upon me."

And so they stayed, delighted with the music, fascinated with the graceful dancing, and dazzled with the scenery. At length the curtain fell, and the evening's performance was over.

"It is only half-past eleven," said Ashton, when they got outside; "now we must just turn in somewhere, and get a bit of supper, and then, I suppose we must separate. There is a first-rate hotel close handy, where I sometimes dine. What do you say?"

"Just the place for us," said Dixon; "because we must limit ourselves to half an hour, and we shall get what we want quickly there."

As they went into the supper-room, George saw, to his vexation, Lawson and Williams, with a party of boon companions, seated round a table at the further end. He instantly drew back; but it was too late, they had recognised him.

"Confound it!" he said to Ashton, "there are some chaps from our office, at the end there. I do not wish to meet them; cannot we go into a private room?"

"Certainly," said Ashton; and the party retreated. "But why do you not

wish to meet your fellow clerks?"

"Because they are a low set of fellows with whom I have nothing in common."

When supper was over and the clock had struck twelve, the party separated.

"Good night, old fellow," said Ashton to George. "I am sorry we have not seen quite the sort of play you would have liked; but now you have seen the worst side of the theatre, and next time we go together we will try and see the best; so that between the two extremes you will be able to discriminate and determine what sort of place the theatre is as an amusement."

"Thank you, Ashton, for your share in the entertainment to-night. I will talk to you about the play some other time; but I must say, candidly, I never felt so distressed in my life as I did while that gross insult to all good feeling, 'The Serious Family,' was being performed. If you had said to me what that wretch, Captain Maguire, said in my hearing to-night, I would not have shaken hands with you again as I do now."

An omnibus happened to be passing for the Angel at Islington that moment, and George and Hardy got up.

"What shall we do with regard to Williams and Lawson?" said Hardy. "They have got a victory to-night. I fear our protest against theatres and taverns is over with them for ever now, seeing they have caught us at both places."

"I cannot but regret the circumstance," said George, "but it is nothing to them; they are not our father-confessors, and we are not bound to enter into any particulars with them. The greatest difficulty with me is how to manage when I get home. I don't like deceiving my mother; but I should not like to pain her by saying I have been to the theatre. She knew I started for the institution, and that I might possibly be late; so, unless she asks me where I have been, I don't see that there will be any good in unnecessarily distressing her."

"The disagreeable thing in such a case is," replied Hardy, "if the fact comes out afterwards, it looks as if a deception had been practised."

George and Hardy had never talked together like this before; and they spoke hesitatingly, as if they hardly liked to hear their own voices joining to discuss a mean, unworthy, dishonourable trick.

O temptation! what an inclined path is thine! How slippery for the feet, and how rapidly the unwary traveller slides along, lower and lower--each step making the attempt to ascend again to high ground more difficult! George had made many dangerous slips that night--would he ever regain his position?

Mrs. Weston was sitting up for George, and pleased was she to hear, at

last, his knock at the door.

"Mother, this is too bad of me, keeping you up so late," said George. "I really did not mean to keep bad hours to-night; but I will turn over a new leaf for the future."

"I do not mind sitting up, George, if it is for your good," she answered; "but I fear you will not improve your health by being so late as this. Have you enjoyed your meeting to-night?"

"Pretty well," said George; "but I have been with Ashton, Dixon, and Hardy since."

"Then you have not had supper?"

"Yes, we had supper with Ashton." George got red as he said this. It was the first time he ever remembered wilfully deceiving his mother.

"Oh! that has made you late, then," said Mrs. Weston. "I am afraid Ashton has so many attractions in those apartments of his--what with friends, books, and curiosities--that you find it difficult to break up your social gatherings."

"It is too bad of me to leave you so often, my dear mother; but I don't mean to go to Ashton's again for some time, unless he comes to see us; and so I shall return straight home from the institution for a long while."

When George retired to his room, he felt so distracted with all that had taken place, that his old custom of reading a chapter from God's Word, and kneeling down to pray before getting into bed, was abandoned for that night. He tried to sleep, but could not. The strains of music were yet ringing in his ears, and the dazzling light was still flashing before his eyes. Then the plays came again before him; and he followed the plots throughout, smiling again over some of the jokes, and feeling depressed at the sad parts. Then he thought of Williams and Lawson, and reproached himself for having acted that evening very, very foolishly. Alas! this was not the right term; it was more than foolishness to tamper with the voice of conscience, to violate principles which had been inculcated from childhood, to plot wilful deceit, and act a lie. Instead of saying he had acted foolishly, he should have said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight Have mercy upon me, O God! Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquities, and cleanse me from my sin; for against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil." But George only said, "I am so very vexed I went with Ashton to-night; it was very foolish!--very foolish!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE LECTURE.

"You look seedy this morning, Mr. Weston," said Williams, as George entered the office on the following day. "The effect of last night's dissipation, I suppose. How did you like the play?"

"Not at all," answered George, mortified and angry at having the question put to him before all the clerks, who were now informed of the fact of his having been there.

"No; I suppose one Abinadab Sleek does not like to hear another one of the same gang spoken ill of, eh?"

"I do not understand you," said George.

"Then, to put it plainer, you and Hardy, who are of the 'Serious Family' style, don't like to see yourselves taken off quite so true to life as you were last night at the Adelphi. You saw that old canting Abinadab Sleek was up to every dodge and vice, although he did seem such a sanctified individual in public; and our young Solomons, who condemn wicked theatres and disgusting taverns, can go to both on the sly, and be as sanctimonious as ever Abinadab was in office."

George felt his hands clench, and his eyes flash fire. He could bear taunts from Williams, when he had right on his side, and felt the consciousness of innocence; but he could not bear it now.

"You lie," said George passionately, "in drawing that comparison."

"And you lie continually," said Williams, "in acting a perpetual edition of that part of the 'Serious Family' represented by Abinadab Sleek."

"Fight it out I fight it out!" said Lawson. "The Governor won't be here for half an hour; bolt the door and have it out."

"Nothing of the kind," said Hardy, stepping forward. "Williams is the aggressor in this instance; it is nothing to him if Weston and I went to the theatre every night in our lives; he has no right to interfere; if he fights it must be with Weston and me, for he insults me as much as my friend."

"Then come on," said Williams, taking off his coat, "and I'll take you both: one man is worth two canting hypocrites, any day."

But no one had bolted the door, and, to the surprise of all, Mr. Compton stood before them.

"What is this?" he said; "young men in my office talking of fighting, as if it were the tap-room of a public house? George Weston! I did not think this of you."

"Do not judge hastily, sir," said Hardy. "My friend Weston has been grossly insulted by Mr. Williams, and the little disturbance has only

been got up through jealousy, to get him into trouble."

"Step into my room a moment, Mr. Hardy," said Mr. Compton; "and you, too, Weston and Williams."

George was flushed with excitement; but his proud, manly bearing, in contrast to the crest-fallen Williams, won for him the admiration of the whole staff of clerks.

Mr. Compton patiently heard from Hardy a recital of the causes leading to the fray, and was made acquainted with the course of opposition George had to contend with, from Williams and Lawson, ever since he had been in the office.

"I regret this circumstance," said Mr. Compton, "for several reasons. I have always held you, Weston, in the highest estimation, nor do I see sufficient cause, from this event, to alter my estimate; but I have always found my best clerks those who have been in the habit of spending their evenings elsewhere than in theatres and taverns. I am not surprised at the part you have taken, Mr. Williams; and it now rests with you, whether you remain in this office or leave. I will not have the junior clerks in this establishment held in subjection to those who have been with me a few years longer; nor will I have a system of insult and opposition continued, which must eventually lead to unpleasant results. If I hear any more of this matter, or find that you persist in your unwarranted insults on Mr. Weston, I shall at once dismiss you from my service. You did well, Mr. Hardy, in interfering to prevent a disgraceful fight; and, much as I dislike tale-bearing, I request you to inform me, for the future, of any unpleasantness arising to Mr. Weston from this affair."

Williams was terribly crest-fallen, and the tide of office opinion turned from him in favour of George and Hardy, who, without crowing over the victory they had gained, yet showed a manly determination not to allow an insult which reflected upon their characters.

"I tell you what it is," whispered Lawson to Williams; "Old Compton takes a fancy to those two sneaking fellows, and, after this affair, the office will get too hot for us if we do not draw it milder to them. If I were you, I should waylay them outside the office and say something civil, by way of soft soap, so as to nip this matter off, for you've got the worst of it so far."

Williams determined to accept the hint Lawson had given him, and when the office closed, remained in the court until George came out.

"Mr. Weston," he said, stretching out his hand, which George felt would be mean-spirited not to take, "that was an unpleasant affair this morning, but I didn't think you would fire up as you did; and when I let fly at you, it was only in joke."

"I must deny that it was a joke," George replied; "it was an intended insult. Probably you might not have thought it would have produced

indignation in me, because you, evidently, do not understand my feelings in the matter. However, let the thing drop now. I will not retract what I said to you this morning, that you lied in forming that estimate of my character, nor do I ask you to retract your words, unless your conscience tells you that you wronged me."

"What I said was hasty, and I don't mind eating all my words," said Williams; "so, as the song says, 'Come, let us be happy together.' Will you come into the King's Head, and take a glass of wine on the strength of it?"

"No, thank you," said George; "but as it is no wish of mine to live at loggerheads with any one, here is my hand upon it."

And then they shook hands, and so the matter ended. But it ended only so far as Williams was concerned. A day or two afterwards Mr. Brunton was passing the office, and he called in to say "How d'ye do?" to Mr. Compton. In the course of conversation he asked how George was getting on, and whether he continued to give satisfaction.

"Yes," said Mr. Compton, "I have no fault to find with him; on the contrary, he is the best junior clerk I ever had, and I trust him with matters I never placed in the hands of a junior clerk before. But there was an unfortunate occurrence the other day, which I think it right to mention to you confidentially." And then Mr. Brunton heard the whole history of the theatre adventure, and its consequences in the office on the following morning. He was grieved, deeply grieved. At first he could not credit the account; but when he heard that George had himself confessed to the truth of the circumstances before Mr. Compton, and there was no longer room to doubt, a tear stood in his eye as he thought of his nephew--that noble, manly boy, whom he loved with all the affection of a father--stooping to temptation, and acting the part of a deceiver; for Mr. Brunton had spent an evening with Mrs. Weston and George, and had heard nothing of his having been to a theatre, nor did he believe Mrs. Weston was aware of it.

"What I have told you is strictly confidential," said Mr. Compton; "but as you are, as it were, the father of George Weston, I thought it only right that you should know this, in order that you may warn him, if he has got into the hands of bad companions."

George was absent from the office during the interview, and did not know until some days afterwards of his uncle's visit.

Mr. Brunton went from Falcon-court a sadder man. He was perplexed and harassed; he could not conscientiously tell Mrs. Weston, as he had received the information in confidence; he could not speak directly to George upon the subject, because he would at once have known that Mr. Compton must have given the statement to his uncle. He was obliged, therefore, to remain passive in the matter for a day or two, and resolved to spend an evening that week at Islington.

In the meantime the affair became known to Mrs. Weston, and in rather a

curious manner. George had worn his best coat on the evening he went to the theatre; and one day as Mrs. Weston, according to custom, was brushing it, before putting it away in his drawers, she turned out the pockets, and, amongst other things, drew forth a well-used play-bill.

"George has never been to the theatre, surely?" she asked herself. "Impossible! he would have told me had he done so, for he is far too high-principled to deceive me."

But the sight of that play-bill worried Mrs. Weston. She thought over it all day, and longed for the evening to come, when she might ask George about it.

That evening Mr. Brunton had determined to spend at Islington; and as he was passing Falcon-court, he called for George on his way, and they walked home together.

The play-bill happened to be on the table when they entered, and it caught the eye of both George and Mr. Brunton at once.

"Where did you get that from?" asked George, colouring, not with the honest flush of self-respect, but with the burning sense of deceit detected.

"I found it in your pocket, George; and as I have never found one there before, I thought I would leave it out, to ask you how you came by it."

"I came by it the other night, when I went to the theatre," said George; for he could not tell a direct falsehood. "I did not tell you of it at the time, but led you to suppose that I had been at the institution."

Mrs. Weston was indeed sorry to hear George's account of what had passed; but Mr. Brunton felt all his old confidence in George restored by the open, genuine statement he made.

"George," said Mr. Brunton, "I know you are old enough to manage your affairs for yourself, without an uncle's interference, but do take from me one word of caution. I fear you may be led unwittingly into error by your associates. Do be on your guard--'if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.' If you feel it right, and can conscientiously go with them and adopt their habits, I have no right, nor should I wish to advise you; but if you feel that you are wrong in what you do, listen to the voice of your better self, and pause to consider. Do not turn a deaf ear to its entreaties, but be admonished by its counsel, and rather sacrifice friends and pleasure than that best of all enjoyments--the satisfaction of acting a part of duty to God and yourself."

George did not argue the point with his uncle; he felt himself in the wrong, but could not see his way clear to get right again.

"I have made so many resolves in my short life," he said, "and have broken them so often, that I will not pledge myself to making fresh ones. My error, in this instance, has not been the fault of my companionships,

but entirely my own; and, as far as I can see, the chief blame lies in having concealed the matter from my mother, which I did principally out of kindness to her. But I will endeavour to take your counsel, uncle."

Weeks passed away, and with them the vivid memories of that time. George had at length reasoned himself into the idea that a great deal of unnecessary fuss had been made about nothing, and instead of weaning himself from the society of Ashton, they became more than ever thrown into each other's company. George was a constant attendant at the institution, where he was surrounded by a large circle of intimate acquaintances, with whom much of his time was spent. In the office he had risen in the estimation of the clerks. Williams and Lawson, finding that opposition was unavailing, altered their conduct towards him, and became as civil and obliging as they had before been insulting and disagreeable. George began to think he had belied their characters from not having known sufficient of them; and instead of shunning them, as he had hitherto done, sometimes took a stroll with them in the evening after office hours, and once or twice had dined with them at the King's Head.

Imperceptibly, George began to alter. Sooner or later, evil communications must corrupt good manners; and from continually beholding the lives of his companions, without possessing that one thing needful to have kept him free from the entanglement of their devices, he became changed into the same image, by the dangerous power of their influence and example.

A month or two after the theatre adventure, Mrs. Weston received an invitation to spend a week or two in the country with some relatives, whom she had not seen for several years. Mr. Brunton persuaded her to accept it, as the change would be beneficial; and George, knowing how seldom his mother had an opportunity for recreation, added all his powers of argument to induce her to go. The only obstacle presenting itself was the management of the house during her absence. Mr. Brunton invited George to stay with him while Mrs. Weston would be away; and she did not like to leave her servant alone in the house with the boarders. It was at last arranged that George should decline Mr. Brunton's invitation, and have the oversight of the house during his mother's absence.

The first night after her departure, George brought Hardy home with him to spend the evening, and a pleasant, quiet time they had together.

"It will be rather dull for you, George," said Hardy, "if Mrs. Weston is going to remain away for a few weeks. What shall you do on Sunday? You had better come and spend the day with us."

"No, I cannot do that, because I promised I would be here, to let the servant have an opportunity of going to church. But I mean to ask Ashton to come and spend the day here, and you will come too; and there's Dixon, he is a nice fellow, I'll ask him to come as well."

"What is to be the programme for the day?" said Hardy. "Of course it

will be a quiet one."

"We will all go to church or chapel in the morning, spend the afternoon together at home, and take a stroll in the evening after the service. Are you agreed?"

"I think we shall have a very nice day of it. Let the other chaps know of it early, and we will meet here in good time in the morning."

Sunday came, and George's friends arrived as he expected. They were early, and had time for a chat before starting out.

"Where shall we go this morning?" asked George. "There is a very good minister close by at the church, and another equally good at the chapel. My principles are unsectarian, and I do not mind where it is we go."

"Don't you think," said Dixon, "we might do ourselves more good by taking a stroll a few miles out of town, and talking out a sermon for ourselves?"

"I am inclined to the belief that nature is the best preacher," Ashton remarked. "We hear good sermons from the pulpit, it is true; but words are poor things to teach us of the Creator, in comparison with creation."

"I do not agree with you in your religious sentiments, Ashton, as you know," said George. "Creation tells us nothing about our Saviour, and, as I read the Scriptures, no man can know God, the Father and Great Creator, but through Him."

"And yet, if I remember rightly, the Saviour said that He made the world, and without Him was not anything made that was made--so that He was the Creator; and when we look from nature up to nature's God we see Him, and connecting His history with the world around us, we have in creation, as I said before, the best sermon; aye, and what the parsons call a 'gospel' sermon, too."

"I agree with you," said Dixon; "preaching is all very well in its way, and I like a good sermon; but the words of man can never excel the works of God."

"A proper sermon," replied George, "is not uttered in the words of man; they are God's words applied and expounded. Nature may speak to the senses, but the Scriptures alone speak to the heart; and that is the object of preaching. But you are my visitors, and you shall decide the point."

"Then I say a stroll," said Ashton.

"And so do I," chimed in Dixon.

"I am for going to a place of worship," said Hardy.

"And so am I," Ashton replied; "is not all God's universe a place of worship?"

"Perhaps so," answered Hardy; "but I mean the appointed and proper place, where those who try to keep holy the Sabbath day are accustomed to meet--a church or chapel."

"I side with Hardy," said George. "But I am willing to meet you halfway. If I go with you this morning, you must all promise to go with me in the evening. But bear in mind I am making a concession, and I go for a stroll under protest, because it is contrary to my custom."

"All right, old chap," said Ashton. "I never knew anybody's conscience fit them so uneasily as yours does. But it always did; at school, you were a martyr to it, and I believe the blame lies at the door of dear old Dr. Seaward, who persisted in training us up in the way we should go, just as if we were all designed to be parsons."

"Poor old Dr. Seaward!" said George. "If he only knew two of his old scholars were going out for a stroll on Sunday morning to hear nature preach, I believe his body would hardly contain his troubled spirit."

"And he would appear before us to stop us on our way--"

"Like the spirit before Balaam and his ass, seems the most appropriate simile," said Dixon, "for, if I recollect rightly, Balaam was going where he should not have gone, and his conscience gave him as much trouble as Weston's does."

George did not think and say, as Balaam did, "I have sinned;" but he felt the sting of ridicule, and determined he would allow no conscientious scruple to bring it upon him again during that day.

"After all," he argued with himself, "what is the use of my being conscientious, for I am so wretchedly inconsistent? I had better go all one way, or all the other, instead of wavering between the two, and perpetually showing my weakness."

It would have puzzled any one to have told what sermon nature preached to that merry party, as they wandered through green fields and quiet lanes, talking upon a hundred different subjects, and making the calm Sabbath morn ring with the strains of their laughter.

"Your idea of creation's voice is better in theory than in practice," George said, when they returned home. "Can any of you tell me what the text was which nature took to preach from, for I have no distinct remembrance of it?"

"The text seemed to me to be this," said Dixon, "that 'to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens--a time to weep and a time to laugh--a time to keep silence and a time to speak;' and the application was, that we had chosen the right time for enjoying much speaking and much laughing."

The afternoon was not spent as George had been accustomed to spend it. Light, frivolous conversation, and still more dangerous debate upon religious subjects, without religious feeling, occupied the time, and George felt glad when the evening came, and they started off together to hear a popular preacher, whose merits they had been discussing during the afternoon.

On their way thither they passed a large building, into which several people were entering, and as the outside of the place was ornamented with handbills, they paused to read them. They ran thus:--

"HALL OF SCIENCE.--A Lecture will be delivered in this Hall on Sunday evening, at half past six, by Professor Martin, on 'The Uses of Reason.' Young men are cordially invited to attend.

"What is truth? Search and see."

"Do you know anything of this Professor Martin?" asked Dixon. "Is he worth hearing?"

"A friend of mine told me he had heard him, a little while ago, and was never better pleased with any lecture," Ashton answered. "Shall we put up here for the evening?"

"Is he a preacher, or a mere lecturer?" asked George. The question attracted the attention of a person entering the Hall; and, turning to George, he answered:--

"Professor Martin is one of those best of all preachers. He can interest without sending you to sleep, and his discourses are full of sound wisdom. He is a lover of truth, and advocates the only way to arrive at it, which is by unfettered thought. In his lectures he puts his theory into practice by freely expressing his unfettered thoughts. I have seats in the front of the lecture-room; if you will favour me by accepting them, they are at your service."

The plausible and polite manner of the stranger was effectual with George.

"I don't think we can do better than go in and hear what the lecturer has to say," he said to the others. And, assent being given, they followed the stranger, and were conducted to the proffered seats.

The audience consisted principally of men, the majority of whom were young and of an inferior class, such as shopmen and mechanics. There was a large platform, with chairs upon it, but no pulpit or reading-desk. When the lecturer, accompanied by a chairman and some friends, entered, George and his companions were surprised to hear a clapping of hands and stamping of feet, similar to the plan adopted at public amusements.

"This does not seem much like a Sunday evening service," said George. "We have time to leave, if you like; or shall we stay and see it out?"

"Oh! let us stay," replied the others.

No hymn was sung, no prayer was offered at the commencement, but the lecturer, with a pocket Bible in his hands, quoted a few passages of Scripture, as follows:--

"Come now, and let us reason together,"--Isa. i. 18; "I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and to know the reason of things,"--Eccles. vii. 25; "And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures,"--Acts xvii. 2; "Be ready alway to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you,"--1 Peter iii. 15.

The object of the lecturer was to show that no intelligent being could receive truth unless that truth commended itself to reason, because the two were never in opposition one with the other. Conscience, he said, was the soul's safeguard, and reason the safeguard of the heart and intellect. It was irrational to condemn any course of conduct which conscience approved, and it was equally irrational to believe anything that could not be understood. The Word of God might be useful in its way, but only as studied with unfettered thought. If that Word exalted reason and then taught inconsistencies and absurdities, reason must discriminate between the right and the wrong. "For example," he continued, "if that book tells me that there are three Gods, and yet those three are one, I reason by analogy and say, here are three fingers; each one has its particular office; but I cannot make these three fingers one finger, neither can I make three Gods one God."

So the lecturer continued, but he did not put his case in so many plain words as these; every argument he clothed with doubtful words, so as to make falsehood look like truth, and blasphemy like worship. He was an educated and intelligent man, gifted with that dangerous power of preaching the doctrine of devils in the guise of an angel of light, and handling deadly sophistry with as firm a grasp as if it were the sword of the Spirit.

At the conclusion of the lecture he announced his intention to speak from that platform again on the following Sunday, and invited all who were inquiring the way of truth to be present, and judge what he said, "whether it be right, or whether it be wrong."

As George and his friends were leaving the hall, the stranger, who had accosted them before, came up, and bowing politely said--

"Will you allow me to offer you the same seats, for next Sunday evening? If you will say yes, I will reserve them for you; otherwise you may have difficulty in obtaining admission, for the room will, in all probability, be more crowded than to-night, as Professor Martin was not announced to lecture until late in the week, and the friends who frequent the Hall had no notice of his being here."

"I will certainly come," said Ashton. "I never heard a speaker I liked better. What say you?" he asked, turning to the others.

"I am anxious to hear the conclusion of the argument," said George; "so we will accept your invitation," he added to the stranger, "and thank you for your kindness and courtesy."

It was a long conversation the friends had as they strolled along that evening. To George every argument the lecturer had brought forward was new; and bearing, as they did, the apparent stamp of truth, he was utterly confounded. Although he was a good biblical scholar, as regarded the historical and narrative parts of the Scriptures, he was but ill informed on those more subtle points which the lecturer handled. He had never heard the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, disputed, and had always implicitly believed it; now, when the lecturer quoted Scripture to prove that truth was to be analysed by reason, and reason rejected the idea of a Trinity, he was as unable to reconcile the two as if he had never received any religious instruction at all.

"If what he advances be true," said George, "how irrational many things in the Christian religion are! And how singular that men like him, who 'search into the reason of things' for wisdom, and hold opinions contrary to the orthodox notions of those whom we call Christians, should be looked upon with suspicion and distrust."

"No," replied Ashton; "he met that idea by saying that it was not more than singular, in the early stages of science, for people to be burnt as witches and magicians, because they made discoveries which are now developed and brought into daily use, than it is now for men to be scouted as infidel and profane, because they teach opinions which only require investigation to make them universally admitted."

An unhappy day was that Sunday for George Weston. He had violated principle, made concessions against the dictates of conscience (how poor a safeguard for him!) and had learnt lessons which taught him to despise those instructions which had hitherto been as a lamp unto his feet and a light unto his path.

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." George little thought how rapidly he was passing through those different stages on the downward road. Had he never listened to the council of the ungodly, he would not have walked in the way of evil, but would have avoided even its very appearance; he would not have stood in the way of sinners, parleying with temptations, as he had done on so many occasions; nor would he have occupied that most dangerous of all positions, the fatal ease of sitting in the seat of the scornful.

GETTING ON IN THE WORLD.

"Mr. Compton wishes to speak with you, Weston," said Mr. Sanders, the manager, to George one morning, during the visit of Mrs. Weston in the country.

"Good morning, Weston," said Mr. Compton; "I want to have a few minutes' conversation with you: sit down. You have been in my office now more than a twelvemonth, and I promised that you should have an increased salary at the expiration of that time. Your services have been very valuable to me during the past year, and I am in every way satisfied with you. As a tangible proof of this, I beg your acceptance of this little present," (handing him a ten-pound note,) "and during this year on which you have entered, I shall have much pleasure in giving you a salary of two guineas a week."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you sir," George stammered out, for he was flabbergasted at the kindness of his employer; "I hope I may always continue to do my duty in your office, and deserve your approbation."

"I hope so, too;" said Mr. Compton, "both for your sake and for my own. If you continue as you have begun, there is a fair field before you, and I will advance you as opportunity occurs. Now, apart from business, I want one word with you. I kept you purposely last year upon a low salary, because I have found that sometimes it is beneficial to young men to have only a small income. With your increased salary, you will have increased means for entering that style of life which is, unfortunately, too universal with young men--I mean the gaieties and dissipations of a London life are now more open to you than they were before. But what is termed a 'fast' young man never makes a good clerk, and I do hope you will not allow yourself to fall into habits which will be obstacles to your future promotion."

"I will endeavour, sir, always to maintain my position in your office," said George; "and I feel very grateful to you for the interest you take in my personal welfare."

George was in high spirits with his good fortune. He had not expected more than a guinea, or at the utmost thirty shillings a week increase for his second year, and had never dreamt of receiving so handsome a present as L10. By that night's post he sent off a long letter to his mother, giving her an account of the interview, and of his future prospects.

But George had different ideas about his future now, to those he cherished a twelvemonth back. Then he thought only of himself and his mother; how happy they would be together, and how much he would endeavour to contribute to her enjoyment. Now he congratulated himself that he would be upon a footing with his friends, that he could do as they did, and that he had the means to follow up those recreations which were becoming habitual to him. For since Mrs. Weston had been away, George had gone step by step further on unhallowed ground. Even Ashton

said, "Weston, you are coming it pretty strong, old fellow!" and Hardy had declared that he could not keep pace with him. Night after night, as he had no one at home to claim his presence there, he had been to theatres and other places of amusement. Sunday after Sunday he had attended the lectures at the Hall of Science, and abandoning himself to the tide which was hurrying him along, he floated down the dangerous stream.

The principles of infidelity which had been inculcated, appealed to him with a voice so loud as to drown the appeals from a higher source. The one approved his conduct, the other condemned it--the one pointed to the world as a scene of enjoyment, the other as at enmity with God. George felt that if he would hold one he must resign the other. He had not that moral courage, or rather he had not the deep-rooted conviction of sin, or the earnest love and fear of God, to enable him to burst through the entanglements of the world and the world's god, and choosing whom he would serve: he loved darkness rather than light.

When Mrs. Weston returned, after a month's absence, she could not but observe an alteration in George. Although he never told her of his attendance at the lectures on Sunday, or the arguments he had had with friends who held infidel opinions, she soon perceived that George's feelings were undergoing a rapid and dangerous change. Those subjects on which he was once in the habit of conversing with her, he now carefully shunned. He was affectionate and kind to his mother still, and loved her with all his old intense love, but that ingenuous confidence which he had always reposed in her was gone. Things that were dear to him now he could not discuss with her; instead of telling her how he spent his time, and what were his amusements, he avoided any mention of them. The deception which he first practised on that night when he yielded to Ashton's persuasion, was now a system. He reasoned the matter over with himself: there could be no good in telling her; their opinions were different; he would take his course, independently of hers.

Uncle Brunton noticed the change; for to those who saw him seldom the change was sudden. But to George, every day there seemed an epoch, and he was unconscious of the rapidity with which old associations and ideas cherished from childhood were thrown down and trampled upon by the new feelings which had taken possession of him.

"George," said Mr. Brunton to him one day, "I am growing uneasy about you. I feel that I am not the same to you, nor you to me, we used to be, only a few months back. I cannot tell the reason--cannot tell when the difference commenced or how--but for some months past--ever since your mother's visit to the country--there has been a want of that old confidential, affectionate intercourse between us there used to be."

"I was younger then," said George, "and the freshness of youthful feeling and attachment may die away as we advance in years; but I am not aware that I have ever given you occasion to say I do not love you sincerely still, uncle. Your kindness to me never can, and never will be forgotten."

"Well, George, I cannot explain what I mean. I have a kind of feeling about you that something is wrong which I cannot put into words. I fancy that if I offer you a word of counsel, you do not receive it as you once did; if I talk seriously with you, it does not make the same impression, or touch the spring of the same feelings. You do not talk to me with the old frankness and candour which made my heart leap, when I thanked God I had got some one in the world to love, and who loved me. But perhaps I wrong you, and expect too much from you."

"No, not that, uncle. Frankness, candour, and love are due to you, and while I have them they shall always be yours; and to prove it, I will tell what I have never told any one before, what I have hardly spoken to my own heart. I think of the George Weston you brought away from Dr. Seaward's, who stood with you beside a father's deathbed, and who, eighteen months ago, went into Mr. Compton's office; then I think of George Weston of to-day, and I feel amazed at the change a few years has made. I have asked myself a hundred times, am I really the same? Oh, uncle! you do not know what I would give to be that boy again--to live once more in that old world of sunshine."

Tears started to George's eyes as he spoke, and Mr. Brunton could only squeeze his hand, and say, "God bless you, my boy! God bless you!"

A few days later Mr. Brunton and Mrs. Weston were one whole evening together talking about George. Both hearts were heavy, but Mr. Brunton's was the lighter of the two.

"I tell you what I think will be the very best thing for you and for George," he said, "It is now the early spring, and the country is beginning to look fresh and green. Leave this house and take one in the country. I think George can easily be made to accede to this proposition--he was always fond of country life and recreations. He can have a season ticket on the railway, and come down every night. This will wean him from his associates, and induce him to keep earlier hours, and give us, too, a better opportunity to lure him back to his old habits of life."

The arrangements were made. Mrs. Weston, with that loving self-denial which only a mother can exercise, gave up the house, and her circle of friends, and took up her residence in the country, about twenty miles from London. George was pleased with the change, and acquiesced in all the plans which were made.

About this time, an event happened of considerable importance in the family history. An old relative of Mrs. Weston's, from whom she had monetary expectations, died; and upon examination of the will, it was found that a legacy had been left her of about three thousand pounds, which was safely invested, and would bring to her an income of nearly a hundred and fifty pounds a year.

This was a cause of fear and rejoicing to Mrs. Weston--fear, lest it should be a snare to George, as he would now have the whole of his salary at his own disposal, there being no longer any necessity for her

to share it; rejoicing, that she should be able to give him that start in life which had always been the desire and ambition of Mr. Weston.

A few months' trial of Mr. Brunton's plan for weaning George from the allurements of society in London, by taking a house in the country, proved it to be a failure. For the first month, George went down almost immediately after leaving business, but it was only for the first month. Gradually it became later and later, until the last train was generally the one by which he travelled. Then it sometimes occurred that he lost the last train, and was obliged to stay at an hotel in town for the night. At length, this occurred so frequently, that sometimes for three nights out of the week he never went home at all. On one of these occasions, a party of gentlemen in the commercial room of the hotel where he was staying proposed a game of cards, and asked George to make one at a rubber of whist. George had often played with his own friends, but never before with total strangers. However, without any hesitation, he accepted the invitation, and yielded to the proposition that they should play sixpenny points. The game proceeded, rubber after rubber was lost and won, and when George rose from the card-table at a late hour he was loser to the amount of thirty shillings.

"There is no playing against good cards," said George; "and the run of luck has been in your favour to-night; but I will challenge you to another game to-morrow evening, if you will be here?"

The next night George played again, and won back a pound of the money he had lost on the preceding evening. This was encouraging. "One more trial," said George to himself, "and nobody will catch me card-playing for money again with strangers." But that one more trial was the worst of all. George lost three pounds! He could ill afford it; as it was he was living at the very extent of his income, and three pounds was a large sum. He was obliged to give an I O U for the amount, and in the meantime borrow the sum from one of his friends.

"Hardy, have you got three pounds to lend me?" he asked, next morning; "you shall have it again to-morrow."

"I have not got that sum with me," said Hardy, "but I can get it for you. Is it pressing?"

"Yes; I had a hand at cards last night, and lost."

"What! with Ashton?"

"No; with some strangers at the hotel where I have hung out for the last night or two."

"You shall have that sum early this evening, George; and twice that amount, if you will make me one promise. I ask it as an old friend, who has a right to beg a favour. Give up card-playing, don't try to win back what you have lost; no good can possibly come of it"

"Is Saul among the prophets?" asked George, with something like a

sneer.

"No, George Weston: but a looker-on at chess sees more of the game than the player; and I have been looking at your last few moves in the game of life, without taking part with you, and I see you will be checkmated soon, if you do not alter your tactics. I can't blame you, nor do I wish to, if I could; but when I first heard you had taken to card playing, I did feel myself among the prophets then, and prophesied no good would come of it."

"When you first heard of my card playing?" asked George. "When did you hear of it?"

"A few days since. My father came up from the country by a late train one night, and stayed at the hotel you patronize. There he saw you, and told me about it."

"Confound it! a fellow can't do a thing, even in this great city, without somebody ferretting it out. But I don't mean to play again. I have made a fool of myself too many times already; and it serves me right that I have lost money."

That evening, while George was making his way to the hotel, a lady was journeying towards the railway station. An hour later, she was at the house of Mrs. Weston, and was shown into the drawing-room.

"I must apologise," said Mrs. Hardy, for it was she, "in calling upon you at this hour: but I am very anxious to have some conversation with you."

"It is strange," said Mrs. Weston, "that as our sons have been intimate so long, we should have continued strangers; but I am very delighted to see you, Mrs. Hardy, for I have heard much of you."

"It is with regard to the intercourse between your son and mine that I have called. I do not wish to alarm you; but I feel it right that you should be in possession of information I have of your son."

Mrs. Hardy then narrated the circumstances connected with her husband's visit to the hotel on the evening when he found George there card playing.

"This evening," she continued, "my son returned home earlier than usual, and went to his drawer, where I saw him take out some money--two or three sovereigns. I asked him what he was going to do with it, and after some difficulty I ascertained he intended lending it to your son. It occurred to me at once that George Weston was in trouble with those men; and I thought it only right that you should know."

It was kind of Mrs. Hardy to shew this interest, and Mrs. Weston esteemed her for it. But had they stood beside the table at which George was seated while they were talking, or could they have seen the flush of excitement as he threw down the cards, exclaiming, "By Jove! I've lost

again!" and have watched the flashing eye and heaving breast, they would have felt, even more keenly than they did, how futile were words or sympathies to check the evil.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TEST OF FRIENDSHIP.

We pass over two years of George Weston's life--years full of strange experiences--and look into the office in Falcon-court one morning in the summer of 18--.

Mr. Compton is away on the Continent for a holiday tour, Mr. Sanders is still the manager, and nearly all the same old faces are in the office. George, who is now verging on the legal age of manhood, has risen to a good position in the establishment, and is regarded as second only to Mr. Sanders. He is wonderfully altered from when we saw him first in that office. He is still handsome; but the old sparkling lustre of his eye has gone, and no trace of boyishness is left.

Hardy is still there. Two years have not made so much difference in him as George. He looks older than he really is; but there is no mistaking him for the quiet, gentlemanly Charles Hardy of former days. Lawson and Williams are there, coarse and bloated young men, whose faces tell the history of their lives. Hardy rarely exchanges a word with them. George does more frequently, but not with the air of superiority he once did.

A close observer would have noticed in George that morning a careworn anxious look; would have heard an occasional sigh, and have seen him at one time turning pale, and again flushing with a crimson red.

"You are not well," said Hardy. "You have not done a stroke of work all this morning; quite an unusual thing for you, George."

"I am not well," he replied; "but it is nothing of importance. I shall get Mr. Sanders to let me off for an hour's stroll when he comes in from the Bank."

Mr. Sanders came in from the Bank, but he was later than usual. His round generally occupied an hour; this morning he had been gone between two and three. George watched him anxiously as he took off his hat, rubbed his nose violently with his pocket handkerchief, and stood gazing into the fire, ejaculating every now and then, as was his custom if anything extraordinary or disagreeable had happened, "Ah! umph!"

"The old boy has found out that the wind has veered to the northeast, or has stepped upon some orange peel," whispered Lawson to Williams, who saw that something had gone wrong with the manager.

"Your proposed stroll will be knocked on the head," said Hardy to George. "Mr. Sanders is evidently in an ill humour."

"I shall not trouble him about it," said George; "shirking work always worries him, and he seems to be worried enough as it is."

When Mr. Sanders had gazed in the fire for half an hour, and had walked once or twice up and down the office, as his manner was on such occasions, he turned to George and said, "I want to speak with you in the next room."

"I wish you a benefit, Weston," said Williams as he passed. "Recommend him a day or two in the country, for the good of his health and our happiness."

"Mr. Weston," said the manager, when George had shut the door and seated himself, "I am in great difficulties. This event has happened at a most unfortunate time, Mr. Compton is away, and I don't know how to act for the best. Will you give me your assistance in the matter?"

"Cannot you make the accounts right, sir?" asked George. "I thought you had satisfactorily arranged them last night."

"No, Weston; I have been through them over and over again, but I cannot get any nearer to a balance. I have been round to the Bank this morning again, and have seen Mr. Smith about it, but he cannot assist me. However, inquiries will be made this afternoon, and all our accounts carefully checked and examined; in the meantime, I wish you would have out the books and go through them for me. Hardy can assist you, if you like."

"I will do all I can for you, to make this matter right," said George; "but I can do it better alone. If you will give Hardy the job I was about, I will check the books here by myself."

All that afternoon George sat alone in Mr. Compton's room surrounded with books and papers. But he did not examine them. Resting his head upon his hands, he looked upon them and sighed. Now the perspiration stood in big drops upon his forehead and his hands trembled. Then he would walk up and down the room, halting to take deep draughts of water from a bottle on the table.

Mr. Sanders occasionally looked in to ask how he was going on, and if he had discovered the error.

"No," said George; "the accounts seem right; but I cannot make them agree with the cash-book. There is still a hundred pounds short; but I will go through them again if you like."

"Perhaps you had better. I expect Mr. Smith here by six o'clock; will you remain with me and see him? He may assist us."

"Certainly," said George; "I feel as anxious as you do about the matter,

for all the bills and cheques have passed through my hands as well as yours; and I shall not rest easy until the missing amount is discovered."

Mr. Smith arrived just as the clerks were leaving the office, and Mr. Sanders and George were alone with him.

"Well," said Mr. Smith, "we have gone carefully over every item to-day, and at last the defalcation is seen. This cheque," he continued, producing the document, "is forged. The signature is unquestionably Mr. Compton's, but the rest of the writing is counterfeit."

"A forged cheque!" exclaimed Mr. Sanders, aghast; "impossible!"

"There must be some mistake here," said George, "the accounts in our books, if I recollect rightly, correspond with the cheques; but--"

"It is a clumsily arranged affair, although the forgery is a masterpiece of penmanship," said Mr. Smith; "and if it passes first through your office, and is entered in your books with the false amount, it is clear that some one in your employ has committed the offence. I leave the matter now with you for the present," he added, to Mr. Sanders; "of course you will put the case at once into the proper medium and find out the offender."

When Mr. Smith had gone, George sat down again in the seat he had occupied during that long afternoon, pale and exhausted.

"This is a lamentable business," said Mr. Sanders, pacing the room, "a lamentable business, indeed! I confess I am completely baffled. Mr. Weston, I look to you for assistance. Can you form any idea how this matter has come about? Have you suspicion of any of the clerks?"

"I am equally at a loss with you how to manage in this case. I have no reason to doubt the integrity of any one in this office. Except one," said George, as if a sudden idea had come to his mind. "Yes, I have a suspicion of one; but I cannot tell even you who it is, until I have made inquiries sufficient to warrant the suspicion. Can you let the affair rest over to-night, and in the meantime I will do what I can, and confer with you in the morning."

"That seems the only plan," answered Mr. Sanders. "If I can render any assistance in making these inquiries, I will."

"No, thank you, you will have trouble enough in the matter as it is; and I can do what I have to do better alone."

Half an hour after this conversation, a cab was travelling at the utmost speed along the Clapham road. It stopped at the house of Harry Ashton, and George alighted.

"Ashton," said he, "I want to speak to you for two minutes. I have got into trouble; don't ask me how, or in what way. Unless I can borrow a

hundred pounds to-night, I am ruined. Can you get it for me?"

"My dear George, sit down and calm yourself, and we will talk the matter over," said Ashton. "It strikes me you are up to some joke, or you would never suppose that I, an assistant surveyor with a present limited income, could fork out a hundred pounds down as a hammer.

"I am not joking. I dare not explain more. I require your confidence for what I have already said; but I know you have money, and moneyed friends. Can you get it for me anyhow, from anywhere?"

"No, I cannot, and that's plump," answered Ashton; "it is the end of the quarter, and I have not more than ten pounds in my pocket. You are welcome to that, if it is any good; but I cannot go into the country to my father's to-night, that is very certain; and if I could, he would not advance so much without knowing exactly what it was for; nor should I care to lend that sum, even to you, George, unless I knew what you were going to do with it, and when I should see it back. If it is so pressing, you might have my ten, ten more from Dixon, and I could get a pound or two from other sources."

"No, that would take too long, and I have but an hour or two to make the arrangements." As he spoke, George fell into a chair, and buried his face in his hands.

"What, George, my old pippin, what is the matter?" said Ashton, going to him. "You have lost at cards again, I suppose: but take heart, man, never get out of pluck for such a thing as that. But you are ill, I know you are, you are as white as a sheet. Here, take tins glass of brandy."

"I only feel faint," said George, rising. "I shall be all right when I get out into the open air. Good-bye, Ashton, my old school-chum, we shall never meet again after to-night; but I shan't forget our happy days together--I mean the days at Dr. Seaward's--they were the happy ones, after all."

"George, you are ill, and your brain is touched. Not meet again after to-night? Nonsense, we don't part so easily, if that is the case," and Ashton locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

"Unfasten that door!" almost shouted George; "you do not know my strength at this moment, and I might do you some harm; but I should not like to part with my oldest friend like that. Open the door!"

"Not a bit of it," answered Ashton. "Tell me more particulars, and I will try what I can do in getting the money."

"No; you have told me you cannot. I have one more chance elsewhere; let me try that. Ashton, do not be a fool; open that door, and let me go."

"Then I will go with you," answered Ashton; and he unlocked the door. But while he turned to get his hat, George rushed from the room, opened the hall-door, and, closing it again upon Ashton, jumped into the cab

awaiting him, and giving the word, "Islington, quick!" drove off, leaving his friend in the road, running after the vehicle, and calling upon the driver to stop.

"Don't mind him," George called to the man; "an extra five shillings for driving quickly."

Ashton was at his wit's end. He ran on, till he could run no longer. Just then, an empty cab passing, he hailed the driver.

"Drive after that cab in front," said Ashton, as he got in; "follow it wherever it goes. Sharp's the word, man!"

It was a long time before the traffic in the roads allowed Ashton's cab to overtake the one ahead; but both came up nearly abreast in the Waterloo road, and then the one he was pursuing turned abruptly towards the railway station.

"Ah! George, my old fellow," said Ashton to himself, "you little think I have been so closely on your scent; but I knew I had not seen the last of you."

Both cabs drew up at the station steps together. Ashton jumped out, and ran to meet George; but blank was his astonishment to see an oldish lady and her attendant alight from the vehicle, which he had imagined contained his friend!

We will leave Ashton at the Waterloo station in a mortified and disconsolate state, quarrelling with the driver for having pursued the wrong cab, and follow George Weston to Islington.

"Hardy," he said, as soon as he found himself alone with his friend, "are you willing to help me, to save me, perhaps, from ruin? I want to raise a hundred pounds to-night. I must have it. Do you think you can get it for me?"

"Me get a hundred pounds? Why, George, my friend, you know the thing is a clear impossibility. I could not get it, if it were to save my own life. But why is it so urgent?" he asked.

"You will know in a day or two. I have now one resource left, and only one. Will you go to-night to my uncle, Mr. Brunton. Tell him that I want to save a friend from ruin, and want to borrow a hundred and fifty pounds, which shall be faithfully repaid. Do not give him to understand I want it for myself, but that it is for a friend dear to him and to me. Use every argument you can, and above everything persuade him not to make any inquiries about it at present. Say I shall have to take part of it into the country to-morrow morning, and I will see him or write to him in the evening. Say anything you like, so that you can get the money for me, and prevent him coming to the office to-morrow morning."

"George, I am afraid you have got into some bad business again," said Hardy. "You know I am willing to help you; but I cannot do so, if it is

to encourage you in getting yourself into still greater trouble."

"This is the last time, Hardy, I shall ever ask a favour of you. Do assist me; you cannot guess the consequences if you do not."

"Then tell me, George, what it is that is upsetting you. I never saw you look so wild and excited before. You can confide in me, old fellow; we have always kept each other's counsel."

"To-morrow you shall know all. Now, do start off at once, and see what you can do. If you cannot bring all the money, bring what you can. Put the case urgently to my uncle; he cannot refuse me. I will be here again in about three hours' time; it will not take you longer than that."

Hardy took a cab, and drove off at once. George remained in the street; he paced up and down, and took no rest--he was far too excited and nervous for that. He had got a dangerous game to play, and his plans were vague and shadowy. He had promised Mr. Sanders he would make inquiries about the person he suspected had forged the cheque, and let him know in the morning. His plan was to try and raise the money, pay it to Mr. Sanders on account of the transgressor, and induce him to take no further steps until Mr. Compton returned home. On no other ground would he refund the money on behalf of the forger; and unless Mr. Sanders would agree to these terms, George was determined the matter might take its own way, and be placed in the hands of the magistrates or police.

The hours seemed like days to George while Hardy was on his mission. At length he returned.

"What success?" asked George running to meet him as soon as he came in view.

"Your uncle is in a terrible state of alarm on your account," replied Hardy, "and I fear he will be at the office some time to-morrow, although I tried to persuade him not to do so, because it was no matter in which you were so deeply interested as he supposed. But he cannot lend you the money, nor can he get the amount you want until to-morrow afternoon. However he had fifty pounds with him, and he has sent that."

George took it eagerly. "My plan must fail," he said to Hardy; "but it would only have been a question of time after all. Hardy, you will hear strange reports of me after to-morrow; do not believe them all; remember your old friend as you once knew him, not as report speaks of him. Good-night, old fellow, you have been a good friend to me. I wish we could have parted differently."

"Parted!" ejaculated Hardy; "what do you mean? where are you going?"

"I cannot tell, but I shall see you at the office to-morrow morning as usual; I will tell you more then. Do not say a word to anybody about what has occurred to-night. I know I may trust you; may I not?"

"Yes, always," answered Hardy; "but I wish you would trust me a little

more, and let me share this trouble with you. We have been old friends now for years, George; shared ups and downs, and joys and sorrows together; been brothers in everything which concerned each other's welfare: and now you are distressed, why not relieve yourself by letting me bear part of it with you? Recollect our old and earliest days of friendship, and show that they are still dear to you, as they are to me, by telling me what has gone wrong with you, and how I can serve or soothe you in the emergency."

George could not bear this last touch of kindness. Had Hardy reproached him for having acted foolishly, or warned him from getting into future trouble; had he even accused him of having sought to lead others astray, besides wandering in downward paths himself, George could have listened calmly and unmoved! but this out-going of his friend's heart overcame him, and he burst into tears.

"Good night, Hardy," he said, wringing his friend's hand. "If a prayer may come from my lips, so long unused to prayer, I say God bless you, and preserve you from such a lot as mine." George could not utter another word; he could only shake hands again, and then hurried away to the hotel where he sometimes slept.

It was past midnight when he arrived there. Calling for some spirits and water, and writing materials, he seated himself dejectedly at a table and wrote. The first letter ran as follows:--

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,

"I have some painful news to tell you--so painful that I would rather you should have received intelligence of my death, than that which this letter contains. I know you will not judge me harshly, dear mother; I know you will stretch out to me your forgiveness, and still pray for me that I may receive pardon from _your_ heavenly Father--would I could say _mine_.

"Step by step I have been going wrong, as you know--as I might have known--and now I have sunk to the lowest depths, from which I shall never rise again. Mother, I know the sorrow you will feel when you hear what has happened. I grieve more for you than I do for myself; I would give all the world, if I had it, to save your heart the misery which awaits it, from the conduct of a worthless, rebellious son.

"I cannot bear to see that sorrow. My heart seems nearly broken as it is, and it would quite break if I were to see you suffering as you will suffer.

"I could not bear to see again any whom I have known under other circumstances. I could not bear to be taunted with all the remembrances of the past. Dear mother, I have resolved to leave you--leave London--perhaps leave England. I _may_ never see you again; it is better for you that I never should.

"My tears blind me as I write; if tears could cleanse the past, my guilt would be soon removed. God bless you, dearest mother! I will write to you again; and some day, after I have been into new scenes, started anew in life, and won back again the character I have lost--then, perhaps, I may once more see you again.

"Uncle Brunton will tell you more. He will comfort you; he must be husband, brother, and son to you now.

"God bless you, my dearest mother! I have so wronged you, have been such a continual trouble to you, instead of the comfort poor father thought I should have been, and so unworthy of your love, that I hardly dare hope you will forgive and forget the past, and still pray for

"Your erring Son--

"GEORGE WESTON."

George then wrote two letters to Mr. Brunton. In one of them he thanked him for all his care and kindness, passionately regretted the causes of anxiety he had given him, and the disgrace which now attached to his name. In the other, he begged the loan of the £50 sent to him through Hardy, which, he said, he hoped to pay back in a few years. He also requested that Mr. Brunton would arrange all his accounts, and pay them either from his mother's income, or by advancing the money as a loan.

When the morning dawned, it found George still writing. As the clock struck seven, he packed up what few things he had with him, paid his hotel bill, and drove off to Falcon-court. He was there by eight o'clock, before any of the clerks had arrived.

"Have the letters come?" he asked the housekeeper.

"Yes, sir, they are in Mr. Compton's room," was the answer.

George hastened into the room, looked through the packet, and alighting upon a letter with a foreign post-mark addressed to Mr. Sanders in Mr. Compton's handwriting, he broke the seal. The note was short, merely saying that he had arrived in Paris, on his way home, and expected to be back in a day or two; therefore any communications must be forwarded at once, or he would have left Paris.

George went direct to the Electric Telegraph Office. A form was handed to him, on which the message he desired to send must be written, and he filled it up thus:--

"_From Mr. Sanders to Mr. Compton_.

"Come back at once. A cheque has been forged in your name for £100. George Weston is the forger. It is a clear and aggravated case. Shall he be arrested? Will you prosecute? Answer at once."

In an incredibly short space of time an answer was returned. George was at the Telegraph Office to receive it.

"_From Mr. Compton to Mr. Sanders._"

"I will return to-morrow. Take no steps in the matter; let it be kept silent, I am deeply grieved, but I will not prosecute under any circumstances."

"Well, Mr. Weston," said Mr. Sanders, when George entered the office, "I expected you would have been here before; but I suppose you have had some difficulty in your investigations?"

"I have had difficulty," George answered. "I have been endeavouring to borrow a hundred pounds to pay the deficiency, and then I would have screened the forger; but my plan has failed, and it is better that it should, because the innocent would have been sure to have suffered for the guilty. I am now bound to tell you the name of the criminal upon his own confession."

"Who is it? who is it?" asked Mr. Sanders, eagerly.

"I--George Weston," he answered. "No matter how I did it, or why; I alone am guilty."

Mr. Sanders caught hold of the back of a chair for support. His hands trembled, and his voice failed him.

"It is a shock to you, sir," said George; "and it will be a shock to Mr. Compton. Give him this letter when he comes home, it will explain the circumstances to him. I deeply regret that I should have caused you so much anxiety as I have during the past week, while this inquiry has been pending. I knew the truth must come out sooner or later--but I would rather you should know it from me; crushed and ruined as I am, I have no hope that you will look with any other feelings than those of abhorrence on me, but you do not know the heavy punishment I have already suffered, or you would feel for me."

"Are you aware, George Weston, that there is a yet heavier punishment, and that, as Mr. Compton's representative, I shall feel it my painful duty to--"

"No, sir; here is Mr. Compton's opinion upon the case," said George, handing the telegraphic message to Mr. Sanders, who listened with astonishment as he explained the circumstances. "But should Mr. Compton, upon a careful examination into the case, wish to prosecute," he continued, "I will appear whenever and wherever he pleases. And now, Mr. Sanders, I leave this office, ruined and disgraced, the result of my own folly and sin."

George spoke hoarsely, and his face was pale as Death. Mr. Sanders was moved; and put out his hand to shake hands with him, and say good-bye, but George held his back.

"Remember, sir, you are an honest man; you cannot shake hands with me," said George.

"Weston, I am not your judge; there is One who will judge not only this act, but all the acts that have led to it," said Mr. Sanders, solemnly.

"I have had more interest and greater hopes in you than in any young man who ever came into this office; and I feel more sorrow now, on your account, than I can put into words. Do not let this great and disastrous fall sink you into lower depths of sin. If you have forfeited man's respect and esteem, there is a God with whom there is mercy and forgiveness. Seek Him, and may He bless you! Good-bye, George Weston," and the manager, with tears in his eyes, wrung the cold, trembling hand that was stretched out to his.

George took up his carpet-bag, which he had brought from the hotel, and was about to leave, but he paused a moment.

"Will you send Hardy in here?" he asked Mr. Sanders. "I must have a word with him before I go."

Hardy had been expecting all the morning to have some explanation from George, and had been uneasy at his absence. When he went into Mr. Compton's room he was surprised to see George, with his bag in his hand, ready to make a departure.

"Hardy," said George, "I told you last night I should soon have to bid you good-bye, and now the time has arrived. I am going away from the office, and perhaps from England, but I cannot tell you where I am going. I leave in disgrace; my once good name is now blighted and withered; my old friends will look upon me with abhorrence."

"No, George, I am one of your old friends; I never shall," interrupted Hardy. "I do not know what you have done, nor do I wish to know, but I cannot believe your heart and disposition are changed, or will ever change so much as to make me regard you in any other light than that of a dear and valued friend. But where are you going, George? Do tell me that."

"No, Hardy, I cannot. I am going away, God only knows where; it may be abroad, it may not. I am going somewhere where I shall not be known, and where I can try to work back for myself a character and a good name, which I can never redeem in London. Some day I may let you know where I am."

"But, George, does your mother know where you are going?"

"No," said George, and his voice was tremulous as he spoke. "No; I have no mother now. I am too fallen to claim relationship with one so good and noble and holy as my mother is."

"Oh, George, give up this wild scheme! Have you thought that you are going the most direct way to break your mother's heart, and to make her

life, as well as your own, blank, solitary, and miserable? Whatever wrong you have done, do not add to it by breaking that commandment which bids us honour our parents. Your mother has claims upon you which you have no right to disregard in this way."

"I have thought it all well over, Hardy. I believe it is for her good as well as for mine that our paths should run differently, but I cannot explain all now. I am in dread lest my uncle should call here before I get away. Hardy, good-bye, old fellow."

"No, I cannot say good-bye yet. George, give me your address; promise to let me see you again, and I will promise to keep your secret sacredly."

"I do not know where I am going; I have no fixed plan; but I do promise to write to you, Hardy."

"And now, George, make me one other promise. If you are in difficulties, and I can assist you, or do anything for you in any way, at any time, you will let me know--remember I shall always be Charles Hardy to you, and you will always be George Weston to me. Do you agree?"

"Yes, Hardy, I agree. I cannot thank you. I cannot say what I would, or tell you what I feel. May you be blessed and be happy, and never know what it is to have a heavy, broken heart like mine. And now one promise from you. Go and see my mother; try and comfort her; tell her how I grieve to part from her."

George could not continue; the nervous twitching of his face showed the struggle within, and it was a relief when the hot tears broke through and coursed down his cheek. Hardy was greatly affected. He loved George with an intensity of love like that which knit together the soul of Jonathan and David; he had been to him more than a brother ever since they had been acquainted; in hours of business and recreation, in joys and sorrows, in plans and aims, they had been one; and now the tie was to be severed, and severed under such sad circumstances.

There is a solemnity about sorrow which speech desecrates. Not another word was spoken by either--both hearts were too full for that; but as the tears ran thickly down their cheeks, they grasped each other's hand, and then, fairly sobbing, George hurried from the office.

CHAPTER IX.

IN EXILE.

George went direct from the office to the railway station, and took a ticket to Plymouth. He had but a short time to wait before the train left, and bore him away. The green fields and smiling country were nothing to him; he felt no pleasure in seeing the merry, happy children

playing in the lanes, as the train whizzed past. The greetings of friends on the platforms at the different stations only made him sigh. Who would greet him on his journeys? Tired and worn out with sleepless nights and anxious days, he tried to doze, but the attempt was vain. He feared lest some one might have tracked his steps to the station, and have telegraphed for him to be stopped at the terminus. Then, when he had thought and pondered over such probabilities as these, and endeavoured to dismiss them, he tried to form some plans for the future; but all the future was dark--no ray of light, however faint or distant, could be seen, and every plan he would make must be left to circumstances. When the passengers alighted at one of the stations to take refreshments, George got out too, for the purpose of breaking his long fast. He tried to eat a biscuit, but he could not get it down,--all appetite was gone; so, drinking a glass of ale, he wandered to the book stall, and purchased a newspaper to read during the remainder of the journey. The train started off again, and George settled himself to read. The first thing that met his eye was an account of the assizes, and the first case was headed, "Forgery by a Banker's Clerk." This brought back to remembrance, more vividly than ever, the sad scenes of the past few days; he threw the paper out of the window, and abandoned himself to thought.

At last the train arrived at Plymouth. George hastened on to the platform, and walked rapidly into the town, fearing lest any one should recognize him, or lest any official should wish to detain him. With his bag in hand, he wandered through the streets, uncertain what to do or where to go. Presently he came to a small house, in an obscure street, with a placard in the window stating that apartments were to let. He knocked, and was answered by the landlady, a respectable looking woman, who told him that she had a bedroom and sitting-room to let, and would accommodate him on reasonable terms. George said he should not require the room more than a few days, or a week, as he was about to leave by one of the vessels in the port. The terms were arranged, and he at once took possession. As it was very late, he thought he would go to bed without delay.

"Will you not have some supper first?" asked the landlady.

"No, thank you," said George: "I am tired with my journey, and shall be glad to get to sleep as soon as I can."

"But, sir, you really look ill," persisted the landlady, who was a kind, motherly woman; "will you let me make you a little spirits and water?"

"I will not refuse that," said George, "for I do feel ill. Parting with friends and relatives is at all times a disagreeable matter, and I have bidden good-bye to them in London to-day, rather than bring them down here."

"Ah, sir! parting is a sad thing," answered the woman. "It is two years since my son went to sea; he was much about your age, sir, and he went away against my wish, and I have never seen or heard from him since. He has nearly broken my heart, poor boy, and left me all alone in this

wide, hard world."

George was glad to have some one to talk to, but he was distressed by this narration of his landlady. If she mourned for her son, who had been absent for two years, how would his mother mourn?

George passed a restless, anxious night; when he dozed off to sleep, it was only to be tormented with harrowing dreams, in which he fancied himself at one time standing before a judge in a court of justice, answering to the crime of forgery. At another, gazing upon a funeral procession moving slowly and solemnly along, with his Uncle Brunton following as sole mourner. Then he would start up, half with joy and half with sorrow, as he fancied he heard voices like those of his mother and uncle calling to him from the street. His head ached, and his heart was heavy. He felt thankful when the morning dawned, and it was time to rise. He bathed his hot, feverish head in water, and dressed; but as he passed by the looking-glass and caught a glance at his pale, haggard countenance, so changed within a few short hours, he started.

"Oh, God! give me strength! give me strength!" he said. "If I should be ill, if anything should happen to me, what should I do? I am all alone; there is no one to care for me now!" And he sank down in a chair, burying his face in his hands as if to hide the picture his mind had drawn.

After breakfast, he strolled to the docks, looked over some of the vessels, and made inquiries about the shipping offices. He learned that a ship was about to sail immediately to Port Natal, and that all information could be obtained of the agents. Thither George repaired; the agent gave him an exaggerated account of the signal prosperity which all enterprising young men met with in Natal, praised Pietermaritzburg, the capital of the colony, and offered to give him letters of introduction to residents there, who would advise him as to the best ways of making a comfortable living. The agent then took him down to the vessel, told him that he must take a passage at once, if he wished to leave by her, as she would sail in two or three days at the latest. It was a matter of comparative indifference to George where he went--the large, lonely world was before him, and Port Natal might make him as good a home as anywhere else. George went back with the agent to the office, and paid a deposit of fifteen pounds on the passage money.

"What is your name, sir?" asked the agent, with pen in hand, ready to make the entry.

George coloured as he answered, "Frederick Vincent."

"Then, Mr. Vincent, you will be on board not later than nine o'clock on Tuesday morning; the vessel will go out of harbour by twelve. You can come on board as much earlier as you like, but I have named the latest time. You had better send your luggage down on Monday."

"Luggage?" said George. "Oh, yes! that shall be sent in time."

As George returned to his lodgings, he felt even more wretched than when he started out. It was Wednesday morning, and the vessel would not leave till the following Tuesday. The excitement of choosing a vessel was over; there was now only the anxiety and suspense of waiting its departure. True, he had his outfit to purchase, but this would have to be done furtively; he could not bear to be walking in the streets in broad daylight, noticed by passers-by, every one of whom he fancied knew his whole history, and was plotting either to prevent his departure, or to reveal his secret.

Mrs. Murdoch (that was the name of his landlady) endeavoured to make him as comfortable as possible in his apartments; but external comfort was nothing to George--he wanted some word of love, some one to talk to, as in days of old. He avoided conversation as much as possible with Mrs. Murdoch, for she would talk of her absent son, and every word went as an arrow to George's heart.

That first day seemed a week. Hour after hour dragged wearily along, and when six o'clock in the evening came, George thought all time must have received some disarrangement, for it seemed as if days had elapsed since the morning. He went out after dark to a neighbouring shop and made some purchases of outfit; but he was thankful when he had completed his task, for he had noticed a man walking backwards and forwards in front of the shop, and he felt a nervous dread lest it should be some spy upon him. He resolved that he would remain in his rooms, and not go out again until he left for the voyage on Tuesday, but would ask Mrs. Murdoch to make the remainder of the necessary purchases for him.

How lonely and desolate George felt that night! More than once he half determined rather to bear shame and reproach, and have the society of those he loved, than continue in that dreadful isolation. He was thoroughly unmanned. "Oh, that Hardy or Ashton were here, or any friend, just to say, 'George Weston, old fellow,' once more; what a weight of dreariness it would remove!" Then he would wonder what was going on at home, whether his mother was plunged in grief, or whether she was saying, "He has brought it all on himself, let him bear it." But George could not reconcile this last thought; he tried hard to cherish it; he felt he would infinitely rather know his mother was filled with anger and abhorrence at his crime, than that she mourned for him, and longed to press him to her bosom and bind up the wounded heart. But he could not shake off this last idea. It haunted him every moment, and added to the weight of sorrow which seemed crushing him.

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday passed, and George was still the victim to anxiety and corroding care. He had paced his room each day, and tossed restlessly in his bed each night; had tried reading and writing, to while away the time, and had found every attempt futile.

Mrs. Murdoch was anxious on his account.

"Mr. Vincent," she said to him, "you eat nothing, you take no exercise; you don't sleep at night, for I can hear you, from my room, tossing about; and I am doctor enough to know that you are ill, and will be

worse, if you do not make some alteration. Do be persuaded by me, and take some little recreation, or else you will not be in a fit state to go on board on Tuesday."

"You are very kind, Mrs. Murdoch," replied George, "but I have no bodily ailment. If I could get a change of thought, that is the best physic for a mind diseased."

"It is, sir," replied the landlady; "and now will you think me rude if I tell you how you may have that change of thought? You are about to start on a very dangerous voyage; for long months you will have the sky above and the sea below, and only a few planks between you and death. Have you, sir, committed your way to the Lord, and placed your life in His hands? I know it is a strange thing to ask you, but I hope you will not be offended. You have seemed so sad for the past day or two, that I could not help feeling you wanted comfort, and none can give it but the Heavenly Friend."

"I do want comfort and support, Mrs. Murdoch, but--"

"No, sir, there is no but in the case. 'Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest'--is said to all; and we only have to go to Him to find all we want."

"Well, Mrs. Murdoch, I will see if I cannot combine both your suggestions; and as to-morrow will be Sunday, it will be a recreation to go to some church or chapel. Can you recommend me a good preacher?"

"Yes, sir, that I can. If you will go to my pew at chapel to-morrow morning, I am sure you will like the gentleman who preaches there."

"Then I will go," said George.

When he went up to his room again, those few words of Mrs. Murdoch were still speaking to him.

"'Weary and heavy laden!' he thought; surely that is my lot. I so young, once so happy, to feel weary and heavy laden; how strange! But no, it is not strange--it is natural. Sin brings its punishment, and it is hard work, bearing its burden! oh! that I could find some spot where I could rest."

There was a spot, not far from George, where he could have rested, but he did not know it. He was oppressed with his weariness, and he longed for peace and ease of mind to come to him. He did not consider the words, "Come unto ME."

There was an old Family Bible on the book-case in his room, and George took it down. It was a long time since he had read the Word of God: and when he had it was only to compare it with the dangerous opinions he had received, and find out what he imagined to be its discrepancies and contradictions. A feeling of remorse came over him as he put the book on the table.

"What right have I to open this book, or attempt to find anything here for encouragement?" he asked himself. "I have mocked and ridiculed it in days of prosperity, and yet I am willing to take it up in trouble, as if it were an old friend. Ah! it was an old friend once, but that has all gone by now."

He sat a long time looking at the book. Perhaps there is nothing that brings back the memories of the past more vividly than the sight of a Family Bible to one who has long ceased to read and love it. There are old scenes of childhood associated with it which time can never erase. Who cannot remember sitting on his mother's knee, or with chair drawn up beside his father, hearing its sweet music sounded in the home circle on the Sabbath night? Who can forget the last evening of the holidays before going back to school, when the old book was brought out, and some useful text was selected as a monitor and remembrancer? Who can forget the time when some loved one was ill, and as friends and relatives sat round the bed of the invalid, the Book was laid upon the table, and words of comfort were proclaimed to all.

Many and many a scene moved past George in the mental panorama which the sight of Mrs. Murdoch's book created. He seemed not to be remembering, but to be living in the former days. There was his father seated in the old arm-chair, with Carlo, the faithful dog at his feet, and his elbows rented upon the table, and his head upon his hand--a favourite attitude--as he read the Sacred Word. There was dear old Dr. Seaward, with his spectacles stuck up on his forehead, in his study at Folkestone, and a party of boys round him, listening eagerly to the words of instruction and advice which fell from his lips.

And then the past merged into the present, and George started to find himself alone in a strange room, in a strange town, with a strange Bible before him.

He opened the Book and read. The fifty-first Psalm was the portion of Scripture to which he inadvertently turned, commencing, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness; according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions."

He read the Psalm through in amazement. Again he read it, with increased wonder and astonishment, that any one should have made a prayer so exactly like that which he felt in his heart he wanted to pray; and at last he went to the door and locked it, for fear of interruption, took the Bible from the table and placed it on a chair, and kneeling down read the prayer again; and repeating it aloud, sentence by sentence, offered it up as his petition to the throne of Mercy.

* * * * *

On Sunday morning, when the bells were ringing their glad peals, and the people were already in the streets, on their way to the different places of worship, George started off, directed by Mrs. Murdoch, to the chapel

of which she had spoken to him.

He felt very sad as he walked along; it was the last Sunday, perhaps, he should ever spend in England, and he must spend it alone, an alien from all whom he loved. The temporary calm which he had experienced on the previous evening had gone; no prayer for assistance through the day had issued from his lips that morning, but there was the old feeling of shame, and chagrin, and disgrace, which had haunted him for the past week, and with it the dogged determination to bear up against it until it should be lost in forgetfulness. But George had resolved to go to chapel that morning, because he felt he wanted a change of some sort, and there was a melancholy pleasure in spending a part of his last Sunday in England after his once customary manner.

The preacher was an old gentleman, of a mild, benevolent countenance, and with a winning, persuasive manner. When he gave out the first hymn, reading it solemnly and impressively, George felt he should have pleasure in listening to the sermon. The congregation joined in the hymn of praise, with heart and voice lifted up to the God of the Sabbath in thanksgiving. The singing was rich and good, and George, who was a passionate lover of music, was touched by its sweet harmony. He did not join in the hymn, his heart was too full for that; but the strains were soothing, and produced a natural, reverential emotion which he had been long unaccustomed to feel.

The minister took for his text the words, "'Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.' And Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, 'I will, be thou clean.'"

A rush of joy thrilled through George as he heard the words. His attention was rivetted as he listened to the simple story of the leper being restored to health; and when the preacher drew the comparison between leprosy and sin, and revealed Jesus as the Great Physician to the sick soul, who, in reply to the heartfelt wish, could say, "Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee," George felt the whole strength of his soul concentrated in that one desire, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." He looked into his own heart--he was almost afraid to look--and saw the ravages of disease there. He thought of his past life; there was not one thing to recommend him to God. NEVER before had he seen his sin in the light in which it was now revealed by God's Word. He had viewed it in relation to man's opinion, and his own consciousness; but now the Holy Spirit was striving within him, and showing him his position in the sight of God.

The preacher went on to unfold the sweet story of the Cross, to tell of the simple plan of salvation, and to point to Jesus, the Lamb of God, "who taketh away the sins of the world." It seemed to George as if he had never heard the glad tidings before; it had never made the hot tear run down his cheek, as he thought of the Saviour suffering for sins not His own, until now; it had never before torn the agonised sigh from his heart, as the truth flashed before him that it was he who had helped to nail the Holy One to the accursed tree; he had never realised before that earth was but the portal to the heavenly mansions--that time was

but the herald of eternity. Now, all these things came crowding upon his mind, and when the sermon concluded he was in a bewilderment of joy and sorrow.

A parting hymn was sung--that glorious old hymn--

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins."

When it came to those lines--

"The dying _thief_ rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away:"

he could bear it no longer: he could not restrain the torrent of tears which was struggling to get free; he could not stay in that assembly of people; he must be alone, alone with God, alone with his own heart.

When he reached his apartments, he went immediately to his room, and there, beside his bed, he knelt and poured out his soul to God. Words could not tell his wants, words could not express his contrition; but there he knelt, a silent pleader, presenting himself with all the dark catalogue of a life's sin before his dishonoured God.

George thought he had experienced the extremity of sorrow during the few days he had been in Plymouth, but it was as nothing compared with that he now felt. He had grieved over name and reputation lost, prospects blighted, and self-respect forfeited, but now he mourned over a God dishonoured, a Saviour slighted, a life mis-spent. Is there any sorrow like unto that sorrow which is felt by a soul crushed beneath the sense of sin?

How that day passed, George hardly knew. He felt his whole life epitomised in those few hours spent in solemn confession. Oh, how he longed to realise a sense of pardon--to know and feel, as the leper knew and felt, that he was made clean. But he could not do so: he only felt himself lost and ruined, and found expression but in one cry, "Unclean! unclean!"

He was aroused in the evening by the ringing of church bells again; and, taking a hasty cup of tea, at Mrs. Murdoch's solicitation, he once more bent his steps to the place of worship he had visited in the morning, with the earnest desire and prayer that he might hear such truths taught as would enable him to see Jesus.

How often does God "_devise means_" that His banished be not expelled from Him," and in His providential mercy order those events and circumstances to occur, which are instrumental in preparing the mind for the reception of His truth! It was no chance, no mere coincidence, that the preacher took for his text those words which were associated with so many recollections of George, "_for me to live is Christ_"

Simply, but earnestly, he drew pictures of life, in its many phases, and contrasted them with the one object worth living for. Upon all else was written, vanity of vanities--living for pleasure was but another name for living for future woe: living for wealth was losing all; living for honour was but heaping condemnation for the last day: while living for Christ gave not only pleasure, and riches, and honour here, but hereafter. Then he spoke of the preciousness of Jesus to those who believe, as the sympathising Friend, and the loving Brother; of the honour and joy of living for Him who had died to bring life and immortality to light; and of that "peace which passeth understanding."

That night there was joy in the presence of the angels of God over a new-born soul. As George listened to the voice of the preacher, there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he saw the Father running to embrace the returning prodigal, and felt the kiss of His forgiving love. The words which his earthly father had last spoken to him, were those chosen by his heavenly Father to show him his new blissful relationship as a son. And at what a gracious time! George was a wanderer, an outcast, without father or friend, without object or aim in life, and the doors of heaven were thrown open to him; the sympathy of Divine love was poured into that aching heart, and the words of rejoicing were uttered, "This, MY SON, was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found."

The weary one was at rest, the heart of stone palpitated with a living breath, "The dead one heard the voice of the Son of God, and lived."

Who can sympathise with George as he sat in his room that night, overwhelmed with joy unspeakable? He was a new creature in a new world; old things had passed away, behold all things had become new. He looked up to heaven as his home, to God as his Father, to Jesus as his great elder Brother; and he realised his life as hidden with Christ in God, redeemed and reconciled, henceforth not his own, but given to Him who had washed him, and made him clean in His own blood.

* * * * *

Great joy is harder to bear than great sorrow. George had suddenly gone from one to the other extreme, and at a time when he was suffering from physical prostration, the result of such strong mental struggles.

"Mr. Vincent, it is nine o'clock," Mrs. Murdoch called out, as she knocked at his door next morning. No answer was returned.

"Mr. Vincent, will you come down to breakfast, sir?" she repeated more loudly, but with no greater success.

Again she knocked, wondering that George should sleep so soundly, and be so difficult to arouse, as he was accustomed to answer at the first call.

"Mr. Vincent, breakfast is waiting!"

No answer coming, Mrs. Murdoch was anxious; she knew George had been really ill for several days past, and had noticed his strange manner on the previous evening. Without further hesitation, she opened the door, and there on the floor lay George Weston, insensible, having apparently fallen while in the act of dressing.

Calling for assistance, she at once laid him upon the bed, applied all the restoratives at hand, and without a moment's delay despatched a messenger to the chemist in the next street, with instructions for him to attend immediately.

CHAPTER X.

MAKING DISCOVERIES.

"Will you grant me leave of absence for to-day?" Charles Hardy asked Mr. Sanders, a few minutes after George had left the office, on the gloomy and eventful morning when he disclosed the secret of his guilt.

"I hardly know what to say--what to do," answered Mr. Sanders, puffing and blowing; "business will come to a stand-still--the shutters had better go up at once. But if you want particularly to be off to-day, I suppose I must manage to spare you."

"I may want several days, sir; but if that should be the case, I will return to the office to-morrow in time to see Mr. Compton immediately he comes back"

It was but the work of five minutes for Charles to write a short note, change his office coat, and prepare to start. The note was addressed to Mr. Brunton, care of Mr. Sanders till called for, and ran as follows:--

"MY DEAR SIR,

"Do not be more uneasy than necessary about George. I think I have a clue by which his address may be ascertained. If so, I will report progress to you to-night; but I leave this note for you, in order to allay the distress you will feel in learning he is not here. Rest assured of my earnest desire to serve my dear friend, and to relieve him if possible. My time and services you may command in this cause. In haste,

"Yours very faithfully,

"CHARLES HARDY."

Hardy had a clue, it is true; but it was a very faint one. He had noticed, upon the table of Mr. Compton's room, a "Bradshaw's Railway

Guide;" and as he had not seen one there previously, he imagined it must have been brought in by George, with his carpet-bag and other things, and there left. One page of the book was turned down; Hardy had eagerly opened it, and found it referred to the departures from the Great Western Station.

"I'll go on at once to that station," he thought. "He told me he might be leaving England; perhaps he has gone to Liverpool, Plymouth, or Cork, or some shipping place that can be reached by this line. At all events, I have no other chance but this."

With all speed Charles drove off to Paddington. Diligently he coned over the intricate mysteries of "Bradshaw" as he journeyed along, endeavouring to ascertain when trains would be leaving for any of the places to which he had imagined his friend might be going. It is hardly necessary to say he could not find what he wanted; but his anxiety and suspense were relieved by the search.

Before alighting at the station, Hardy carefully glanced all around to ascertain that George was not in sight; for it was not his intention to speak to him or endeavour to turn him from his purpose, knowing that, in his present excited state he would stand no chance whatever of frustrating his friend's plans, but would rather be adopting the most certain means of destroying his own. Hardy's present object was only to try and find out to what part George would travel, and then communicate with Mr. Brunton and get his advice how to proceed.

Cautiously he walked along the platform, looking into every waiting-room, and making inquiries of the porters if they had seen any one answering to the description he gave of George. This course proving futile, he went to the ticket-office, and consulted a time-table, to find whether any train had recently left for any of the places which, he felt convinced, were the most probable for George to choose. An hour or two had elapsed since the last train left, and George had not had more than twenty minutes' start ahead of him. He took down in his pocket-book the time for the departure of the next train; and then choosing a secluded spot in the office, where he would be out of observation, and yet able to see all who came up for tickets, he waited patiently until the slow, dawdling hand of the clock neared the hour.

Hardy felt the chances were fifty to one that while he was waiting there George might be at some other station, leaving London without a trace to his whereabouts; he thought whether, after all, George might not have purposely, instead of accidentally, left the "Bradshaw" with that particular page turned down, in order that, should he be sought, a wrong scent might be given; and even if he intended to travel by this line and to one of these particular places, might he not choose nighttime as the most desirable for his object? But Hardy had purpose in him; he would not throw away the strongest clue he had, although that was faint, and he resolved to stay there until midnight, it need be, rather than abandon his design,

His patience was not put to such a test as this. While he was standing,

with palpitating heart, behind that door in the booking office, George was in the porters' room, not a hundred yards off, waiting with deeper anxiety for the clock to point to the hour when the train should start. Presently, the first bell rang. A number of people, with bags and packages in hand, came crowding up to the ticket office, but George was not there. Hardy could scarcely refrain from rushing out to look around. What if he should get into a train without a ticket, or send a guard to procure one for him? A hundred doubts and fears were pressing upon him, and--the second bell rang. Two or three minutes more, and the train would be off. At the moment he was consulting his pocket-book to see how long a time must elapse before the next train would leave, he started with joyful surprise to see George walk hurriedly up to the office and obtain a ticket. As hurriedly he disappeared. "Now is my chance," thought Hardy.

"Where did that young man take his ticket for?" he asked the clerk, as soon as he had elbowed his way past the few remaining persons who were before the window.

"Which one?" said he; "two or three young men have just taken tickets."

"I mean the last ticket but one you issued?"

"Plymouth."

"Hurrah!" cried Hardy, to the astonishment of the clerk, who probably would not have given the information, had he not thought the inquirer wanted a ticket for the same place.

Hardy was too cautious, even in the moment of his surprise, to let his object be lost by over-haste; he knew it would not be wise to let himself be seen, and though he longed to rush after George and say, "Good-bye, cheer up, old chap!" he only allowed himself the painful pleasure of looking through the window of a waiting-room, and seeing his old friend and chum, sad and solitary, get into the carriage. Shriek went the whistle, and away went the train. Whether it whizzed along so rapidly, or the smoke and steam enveloped it, or from whatever cause it was, Charles Hardy found his sight growing dimmer, until a mist shut out the scene.

From the station Hardy went home. He wanted to tell his parents some of the occurrences of the day, and let them know of his expected absence. He knew that he had difficulties to meet. George had always been kindly received by Mr. and Mrs. Hardy; they both liked him, and were glad when he came to spend an evening at their house. But latterly they had been rather anxious about the growing intimacy between him and their son, and often had a word of caution been given that Charles should be very careful how far he allowed his friend to influence him.

Now Hardy could only tell his parents that George had got into worse trouble than ever--such trouble that he was obliged to leave his situation, and had decamped, no one except himself knew where. Of course Mr. and Mrs. Hardy would not put a good construction upon the affair. He

anticipated they would say, "Well, I always feared he would come to this;" and would try to dissuade Charles from having anything more to do with him. It was not to be expected they would look with such leniency upon the matter as he would. Therefore, it was with no small difficulty he proceeded, immediately upon reaching home, to tell them of what had occurred. It was a short story, and soon told.

"Now, father," said Hardy, before allowing him time to bring objections to the part he had performed that day, "I have promised Mr. Brunton to assist in finding George, and I have told Mr. Sanders I may be away some days from the office. I know Mr. Compton will not object to this; if that is all, I can have this leave of absence instead of the holiday he promised me next month. George must be found; if I can help it, he shall not leave England--at all events, not in this way. I know it will kill Mrs. Weston, if he does."

"Well, Charles, I know your kindheartedness, and I appreciate it; but I cannot give my consent to the plan. Recollect, by associating yourself with your former friend now, you do injury to yourself; he has got himself into disgrace--he must bear the burden of it. What will Mr. Compton think, when he hears that you--you who have always maintained such strict integrity--have gone off after a dishonest, runaway clerk?"

"I never wish to run counter to your opinions, father, if I can help it; but I must do so now, George Weston is my friend--not was my friend, as you said just now--and I would not act such a cowardly part as to desert him. Don't be vexed at what I say; I know you advise for my good; but you do not know how I feel in this matter. Suppose our positions were changed, and I had done as George has done--there is no impossibility in such a case--I am too weak against temptation to doubt that had I been placed in the circumstances similar to his, I might have done the same, Suppose I had, what would you have thought of me? Should I have been your dishonest, runaway son, to whom all friendship must be denied, and who might be left to bear any burden alone, because I had brought it upon myself? No, father; you would be the first to seek and comfort me, and the first to cry 'Shame!' upon any of my friends who turned and kicked me the moment I had fallen."

Mr. Hardy could not resist the force of his son's argument, nor could he refrain from admiring the genuineness of his friendship for George, and the manly determination he had formed to assist him.

"Well, Charles," he said, "I do not blame you for taking this course. I hope it may be serviceable to your friend, and without any injury to yourself."

"Do not fear, father. And now I must pack up a few necessaries in my bag, and be off to Mr. Brunton's. If I do not return home to-morrow, do not be uneasy about me, and I will write to you every day to say how things are going on."

When Hardy arrived at the house of Mr. Brunton, he found him, as he anticipated, in a high state of nervous anxiety.

"I am so thankful you have arrived, Mr. Hardy," he said, shaking him warmly by the hand: "and I need not tell you Mrs. Weston has been waiting with great impatience to see you."

"Mrs. Weston! is she here?"

"Yes; not many minutes after you had left the office I called there, and received the sad news about--about George. I at once telegraphed to Mrs. Weston to come up to town, and it needed no urging to hasten her, for she had only a short time before received a letter from him, which had filled her with alarm. But let us go to her at once," said Mr. Brunton, leading the way to the drawing-room; "she entreated I would bring you to her the moment you arrived."

As Hardy entered, Mrs. Weston sprang to meet him.

"Have you found George?--where is he?" she asked, and the look of struggling hope and despair was touching to witness.

"I have not found him, Mrs. Weston, but I know the place of his present destination. He has gone to Plymouth;" and then Hardy briefly explained the incidents of the morning.

"I cannot tell you how thankful I am to you, Mr. Hardy," said Mrs. Weston, as he concluded. "May God bless you for your kindness to my poor George!"

"George would have done more for me, Mrs. Weston," Hardy replied; "but, at present, little or nothing has been done. Have you any plans, and can I help you in them?"

"We must go on as soon as possible to Plymouth, and find out where he is. He may perhaps be on the eve of starting away by some of the vessels in the port. Not a minute should be lost."

"Then, sir, I will go down to Plymouth by the mail train which leaves in about a couple of hours, if you will let me; and I promise you that I will do my best to find him," said Hardy.

This unexpected proposition removed an infinite burden from Mr. Brunton's mind. He felt that it was his duty to see Mr. Compton at once, and he had other engagements which made it impossible for him to leave that night. He did not like Mrs. Weston travelling alone, in her present anxious and desponding state, and had been at his wit's end all day to know how to manage.

"But, Mr. Hardy, can you go? Have you consulted your friends at home? Can you manage to get leave of absence from the office?--remember they will be short of hands there," asked Mr. Brunton.

"I have made all arrangements at home, sir and my only difficulty is about Mr. Compton. But if you will please see him as soon as he returns,

and explain why I have left, I am sure he will not be displeased. He was so fond of George, I know he would have said 'Go, by all means,' had he been at home."

"I will undertake to set the matter right with him about you," said Mr. Brunton; "but I doubt whether he will ever allow me to mention poor George's name. Oh! Hardy, this is a sad, sad business!"

"It is, sir; but it is sadder for George than for his friends," replied Hardy. "I cannot bear to think of the trouble he is passing through at this moment. It has cost him much to take the step he has taken, and everything must be done to get him back from his voluntary banishment"

"And everything shall be done that can," said Mr. Brunton. "God grant he is still in England! I feel sure the sight of his mother and his friends sorrowing for him, instead of turning against him as he supposes, will alter his determination."

"Mr. Hardy, may I place myself under your protection until my brother joins us at Plymouth?" said Mrs. Weston, abruptly. "I will go down by the mail train to-night; I cannot rest until he is found."

Arrangements were speedily made, and that night the train bore off Mrs. Western and Charles Hardy to Plymouth.

On the following morning Mr. Brunton called at Falcon-court. Mr. Compton had not yet arrived, but was expected hourly. Not wishing to lose time, which that morning was particularly precious to him, he asked for some writing materials, and seating himself in Mr. Compton's room, intended to occupy himself until his arrival. After he had been there about half-an-hour, his attention was arrested by hearing the door of the clerk's office open, and an inquiry made.

"Is Mr. George Weston here?"

"Mr. Weston has left the office," answered Williams, who came forward to answer the inquiry. "Left yesterday morning."

"Indeed! Where has he gone to? why did he leave?"

"I don't think anyone knows where he has gone to," answered Williams; "and I am not disposed to say why he left."

Williams did not know why he had left, nor were the circumstances of the case known to any of the clerks; but many surmises had been made which were unfavourable to him, and it was with the exultant pleasure a mean spirit feels in a mean triumph, that Williams had at last an opportunity of speaking lightly of the once good name of George Weston, to whom he had ever cherished feelings of animosity.

"Is Mr. Compton in, or the manager?" asked the visitor. "I am exceedingly anxious to know what has become of my friend."

"Between ourselves," said Williams, "the less you say about your friend the better. It strikes me--mind, I merely give you this confidentially as my impression--that, when Weston turns up again, his friends will not be over-anxious to renew their acquaintance."

"What do you mean? I do not understand you."

"What I mean is this. When a clerk is dismissed from an office during the absence of the principal, leaves suddenly and has to hide himself--more particularly when accounts at the banker's do not quite balance--one cannot help thinking there is a screw loose somewhere."

Mr. Brunton overheard all this; he who had never before heard an unfavourable sentence spoken against his nephew. He had not fully realised until that moment the painful position in which George's crime had placed him, nor the depth of his nephew's fall in position and character. He longed to have been able to stand up in vindication of George against the terrible insinuations of Williams; he would have been intensely thankful if he could have accosted the stranger, and said, "That man is guilty of falsehood who dares to speak against the good name of my nephew." But there he stood, with blood boiling and lips quivering, unable to contradict one sentence that had been uttered.

"If Weston does turn up," continued Williams, "will you leave any message or letter, or your name, and it shall be forwarded?"

"My name is Ashton," said the stranger; "but it is unnecessary to say that I called. It does not do to be mixed up with matters like these. I half feared something of the sort was brewing, but I had no idea tilings would have taken so sudden a turn."

Mr. Brunton could restrain his impatience no longer.

"Mr. Ashton," he said, coming suddenly upon the speakers, "will you favour me by stepping inside a minute or two? I shall be glad to speak to you."

Ashton was taken by surprise at seeing Mr. Brunton where he least expected to see him.

"I have been placed in the uncomfortable position of a listener to your conversation in the next room," said Mr. Brunton, closing the door; "and I cannot allow those remarks made by the clerk with whom you were talking to pass unqualified."

"They need little explanation, sir," said Ashton. "George Weston has been on the verge of a catastrophe for some months, and I believe I can fill in the outline of information which you heard given me."

"I am in ignorance of the causes which have led to my nephew's disgrace," answered Mr. Brunton; "nor am I desirous to hear them from any lips but his. You were one of his most intimate friends, I believe, Mr. Ashton?"

"Yes; I think I may say his most intimate friend."

"And you knew he was on the 'verge of a catastrophe.' I have no doubt you acted the part of a friend, and sought to turn his steps from the fatal brink?"

"Well, as to that, he was fully competent to manage his own affairs without my interference. I did tell him he would come to grief, if he did not give up playing."

"And did you add to that advice that he should quit those associates who had assisted to bring him to such a pass?"

"Certainly not; why should I meddle with him in his companionships? You speak, Mr. Brunton, as if I were your nephew's keeper. If George Weston liked to live beyond his means, he was at liberty to do it for me. I am sorry he made such a smash at last, but it is all that could be expected. If ever you see George again, sir, you will oblige me by conveying one message. I did not think when he came to me, two nights ago, to try and borrow a hundred pounds, that he intended to mix me up in any disgraceful business like that of this morning. Had I known it, instead of fretting myself about his welfare, he should have--"

"Made the discovery," interrupted Mr. Brunton, "that he never had a friend in you. My idea of a friend is one who seeks the well-being of another; speaks to him as a second conscience in temptation; loves with a strength of attachment which cannot be broken; and, though sorrowing over error, can still hope and pray for and seek to restore the erring. Mr. Ashton, I do not wish to say more upon this matter; it is painful for me to think how my nephew has been led downward, step after step, by those whom he thought friends, and how sinfully he has yielded. When you think of him, recollect him as the boy you knew at school, and try to trace his course down to this day. You know his history, his companionships, his whole life. Think whether you have influenced it, and how; and if your conscience should say, 'I have not been his friend,' may you be led by the remembrance to consider that no man liveth to himself: and that for those talents and attractions with which you are endowed, you will have hereafter to give account, together with the good or evil which has resulted from them."

To Ashton's relief the door opened, and Mr. Compton entered. Hastily taking up his hat, he bade adieu to Mr. Brunton, glad of this opportunity to beat a retreat.

"Confound those Methodists!" he uttered to himself, as he walked up Fleet-street; "speak to them, they talk sermons; strike them, and they defend themselves with sermons; cut them to the quick, and I believe they would bleed sermons. But why should he pounce upon me? What have I done? A pretty life George would have led if it hadn't been for me, and this is all the thanks I get. I wish to goodness he had not made such a fool of himself; I shall have to answer all inquiries about him, and it is no honour to be linked in such associations."

The meeting between Mr. Compton and Mr. Brunton was one of mingled feelings of pain and mortification. One had lost a valuable clerk, for whom he cherished more than ordinary feelings of regard, and upon whom he had hoped some day the whole management of the business would devolve; the other had lost almost all that was dear to him on earth, one whom he had watched, and loved, and worked for, and to whose bright future he had looked forward with increasing pleasure, until it had become a dream of life. Both were aggrieved, both were injured; but both felt, in their degree, such strong feelings in favour of George, despite his disgrace and crime, that they could look with more sorrow than anger on the offender, and deal more in kindness than in wrath.

Mr. Compton could not but agree with Mr. Brunton that he must be discovered, if possible; and although he could never receive him under any circumstances into his office again, nor could ever have for him the feelings he once entertained, still he felt free to adhere to his first determination not to prosecute or take any steps in the case, nor allow it to have more publicity than could be helped.

"He is still young," said he; "let him try to redeem the past. But it is right he should feel the consequences of his actions, and no doubt he will, as he has to encounter the difficulties which will meet him in seeking to retrieve the position he has lost. You know me too well, Brunton, to imagine that I do not estimate aright the extent of his guilt; and you will give me credit for possessing a desire to do as I would be done by in this case. I believe many a young man has been ruined through time and eternity, by having been dealt with too harshly--though in a legal sense quite justly; at the same time it has been the only course to check a growing habit of crime in others. I know well that in some instances it would be a duty to prosecute, if only as a protection from suspicion of upright persons. But there are exceptional cases, and I consider this to be one of them, although perhaps many of our leading citizens might think me culpable in my clemency; but I think I know your nephew sufficiently well to be warranted in the belief that he feels his criminality, and will take a lasting warning from this circumstance. And now, what do you intend to do, since you know my determination?"

Mr. Brunton explained the plans he had formed, and the valuable assistance which Hardy had rendered him. He was pleased to hear from his injured friend the heartily expressed wish that the end in view might be accomplished. Mr. Brunton had surmounted one great difficulty, and he could not feel sufficiently thankful at the issue. Although he had known Mr. Compton for many years, and had seen innumerable evidences of his benevolence and good nature, he knew, too, that he was the very personification of honesty and uprightness; and he dreaded lest, incensed against George for his ingratitude, and fearing the influence of his conduct might spread in the office, he would take measures against him which, although perfectly just, would, by their severity, prove deeply injurious in such a case, and reduce George, who was naturally sensitive of shame, to a position from which he might never be restored.

At the very earliest opportunity Mr. Brunton went down to Plymouth. Business of the greatest importance, which he could not set aside, had detained him in London until Friday, and his uneasiness had been increased during that time by two notes he had received--one from Mrs. Weston, and the other from Hardy--telling him of the unsuccessful issue of their search. With an anxious heart he alighted at the station at Plymouth, and walked to the hotel, where his sister and Hardy were staying. The look of despair he read in Mrs. Weston's countenance, as they met, told him that no favourable result had been obtained.

"We have been everywhere, and tried every possible plan to find poor George," she said, when Mr. Brunton sat down beside her and Hardy to hear the recital of their efforts. "I should have broken down long ago, had it not been for our dear friend here, who has been night and day at work, plotting schemes and working them out, and buoying me up with hopes in their result. But I feel sure George cannot be in Plymouth, and our search is vain."

"So Mrs. Weston has said all along," said Hardy; "but I cannot agree with her; at all events, I will not believe it until we find out where he has gone. He has not taken a passage in any of the vessels, as far as we can ascertain; he is not in any of the inns in the town, I think, for we have made the most searching inquiries at all of them; but in this large place it is difficult to find any one without some positive clue."

"Have you been able to find out whether he really arrived here?" asked Mr. Brunton.

"I think I have. One of the porters rather singularly recollected a person, answering to the description, arriving by the train in which George left London. It seems he was hastening away from the station without giving up his ticket. No doubt he was nervous and absent in mind; and when the porter called to him, he started and seemed as if he were alarmed: but in a minute he produced his ticket and went out. The porter looked suspiciously, I suppose, at the ticket, and evidently so at George, for he was able to give a full description of him."

"That is so far satisfactory," said Mr. Brunton; "but have you made any more discoveries to render you tolerably sure he is still in Plymouth."

"Yes, I have been to every shop where they fit out passengers for a sea voyage, and have found out one where he purchased some articles of clothing. But the clearest trace I have of him is from the shipping agents. He was certainly looking over vessels on the morning after his arrival here, for one or two captains have described him to me. I have been a great many times down among the shipping, but have not made more discoveries, and I cannot get any information from the shipping offices; but in this you will probably meet with more success, sir, than I have, for a young man is not of sufficient importance to command attention from business men."

Mr. Brunton was fully conscious of the difficulties which were in the

way of finding George, even supposing he was still in Plymouth: but he was not without hope. He could not find words enough to express his strong approbation of all that Hardy had done, and he felt sure that he could have no better assistant in the undertaking than he. A series of plans were soon formed: Hardy was to keep watch upon those vessels which he thought it probable George might choose, and offer rewards to sailors and others for information. Mr. Brunton was to try and discover the names and descriptions of passengers booked at the shipping offices; and Mrs. Weston was to keep a general lookout on outfitters' warehouses, and other places where it might be probable George would visit.

But every plan failed. Saturday night came, and, worn out with fatigue, the anxious trio sat together to discuss the incidents of the day, and propose fresh arrangements for the morrow. Sunday was not a day of rest to them; from early morning they were all engaged in different directions in prosecuting their search, and not until the curtain of night was spread over the town, and the hum of traffic and din of bustle had ceased, did they return to the hotel.

After supper, Mr. Brunton took out his pocket Bible, and read aloud some favourite passages. They seemed to speak with a voice of hope and comfort, and inspired fresh faith in the unerring providence of Him who doeth all things well.

Very earnest were the prayers offered by that little party, as they knelt together and commended the wanderer, wherever he might be, to the care and guidance of the good providence of God. They felt how useless were all plans and purposes unless directed by a higher source than their own; and while they prayed for success upon the efforts put forth, if in accordance with His will, they asked for strength and resignation to bear disappointment nor were their prayers merely that he whom they were seeking might be found, but that he might find pardon and acceptance with God, and that the evil which they lamented might, in the infinitely wise purposes of Providence, be controlled for good.

With fresh zeal and renewed hope the three set forth on the following morning to prosecute their several plans. Hardy had learned that one or two vessels would sail that day, and he was full of expectation that he might meet with some tidings.

Mr. Brunton felt rather unwell that morning--the press of business which had detained him in London, the excitement of the journey, and the fatigue of the previous days, had told upon his health. As he was passing through a quiet part of the town, he called in at an apothecary's to get a draught, which he hoped might ward off any serious attack of sickness. While the draught was being prepared, Mr. Brunton, who was intent upon his object and never left a stone unturned, interrogated the apothecary, a gentlemanly and agreeable man, upon the neighbourhood, the number of visitors in that locality, and other subjects, ending by saying he was trying to discover the residence of a relative, but without any knowledge of his address.

In the midst of the conversation, a servant-girl, without bonnet or

shawl, came hurriedly into the shop, out of breath with running.

"Oh, sir, if you please, sir, missus says, will you come at once to see the young gentleman as stays at our house?--he's taken bad."

"Who is your mistress, my girl?" asked the chemist.

"Oh, sir, it's Mrs. Murdoch, of ---- Street; and the young gentleman is a lodger from London, and he's going away to-morrow to the Indies or somewheres; but do come, sir, please--missus'll be frightened to death, all by herself, and him so dreadful bad."

Mr. Brunton had been an anxious listener. Was it possible that the young gentleman from London could be George?

"How long has your lodger been with you?" he asked the girl.

"A week come Wednesday--leastways, come Tuesday night,"--was the accurate answer.

Mr. Brunton, with eyes flashing with excitement, turned to the medical man. "Will you allow me to accompany you on this visit?" he asked; "I have reason to believe that your patient may be the relative for whom I am searching."

"Then come, by all means," answered the doctor; and, preceded by the girl, who was all impatience to get home, and kept up a pace which made Mr. Brunton puff lustily, they reached the house of Mrs. Murdoch.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SICK CHAMBER.

The sun had gone down, and the twilight was fast losing itself in night. The pale moon was struggling to look out upon the world through the dark, heavy clouds which had collected around, as if expressly to prevent this purpose. The hum of traffic in the street had ceased, and the only sounds that came in at the open window were strains of music, and the confused clamour of voices from a neighbouring tavern. The room was a picture of neatness. The bed was draped in snowy furniture, and the coverlid bore evidence of good taste and the ingenuity of industrious hands. The mantelpiece was adorned with a few photographs and a vase of fresh-gathered flowers.

Upon a table in the corner of the room stood a lamp, with a green shade over it to screen the light from the bed. Beside it were bottles, phials, and other appliances of a sick chamber.

A group stood round the bed, watching, with thrilling anxiety, the face

of the doctor as he held the inanimate hand of George Weston.

You might have heard the ticking of his watch as he stood there and gazed in the face of the patient, while Mrs. Weston and Mr. Brunton and Charles Hardy waited motionless, almost breathless, to hear his verdict.

"It is a more serious case than I imagined at first," said the doctor; "I do not wish unnecessarily to alarm you, but it is my duty to say that the condition of the patient is one of great danger, but I trust not past recovery."

"What is the nature of the illness--tell me candidly?" asked Mr. Brunton, when he could command speech.

"Brain fever," was the laconic answer.

For a long time George Weston lay in that awful state which is neither death nor life--when the spirit seems to be hovering round the body, uncertain whether to wing its flight for ever from the tenement of earth, or return to sojourn still longer in its old familiar dwelling-house. Sometimes he would rave in the frenzy of madness, and then sink in exhaustion with scarcely the power to draw a breath.

Never was a sick-bed tended with greater care than his. Night after night Mrs. Weston sat beside him, bathing the fevered head and cooling the parched lips. Nor would she leave that post for a moment, until Mr. Brunton was obliged to insist upon her taking rest.

"Reserve your strength," he said; "we know not what is before us; it may be--but we have nothing to do with the future," he added, interrupting himself; "that must be left in His hands."

Hardy was not able to remain in Plymouth longer than Wednesday. Mr. Compton had written to him to say that, being short of hands, he was very much pressed in business, and now that the main object of his journey had been attained--for Mr. Brunton communicated with him almost immediately--he should be glad if he would return as soon as possible.

As he stood beside the bed of George Weston on the morning of his departure, and gazed into those pale and haggard features, which had always beamed with a friendly smile for him, but which he might never see again, he could not restrain the impulse of clasping his hand, and uttering solemnly the prayerful wish, "God preserve and bless you, George!"

The words were not heard by George--his ears were closed in dull insensibility--but they were caught by Mr. Brunton and Mrs. Weston, who that moment entered the room, and Hardy was startled to hear the earnest response to his prayer in their united "Amen!"

"And that prayer shall ever be offered for you, Charles," said Mrs. Weston; "I owe you a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid. I shudder to think of what would have happened, had it not been for your

kind, noble, manly friendship. Poor George would have suffered in this lonely place, away from all who loved him, and without proper care, perhaps have died--died afoot."

"You do not know how thankful I feel, Mrs. Weston, that our efforts have not been in vain. Pray write to me every day, to say how he is going on--if it is only just one line; and should there be any change for the--for the better, do let me know at once, that I may come down again, if only for a day, just to congratulate him."

"And if there is another change--a change for the worse?" asked Mrs. Weston, tearfully.

"Write, telegraph--pray let me know somehow," answered Hardy. "I could not bear to part with him without telling and showing him there was one of his old friends who loved him to the last. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Weston; do not over-tax your strength, and keep up a good heart; depend upon it, there are yet happy days for you and for George."

Mrs. Weston sadly missed her young friend after his departure. His hopeful spirits had helped to buoy up her expectations and assuage the sorrows of the present. It seemed as if the sun had hidden itself and the stars had refused their light during those long days when the mother sat watching at the bedside of her son. Mr. Brunton tried in every way to relieve her, but his own heart was heavy, and the two felt more at home in talking dolefully over the bad symptoms of the patient than in looking forward to the future.

But a day came when the strength of the fever abated, and reason returned to her long vacant throne.

It was toward evening: Mrs. Weston was sitting beside the bed, busily stitching away at her work, and Mr. Brunton was resting his head upon his hands as he turned over the pages of a book which he was trying to deceive himself into the belief he was reading, when a deep sigh caused them both to suspend their occupation.

George raised himself up in bed, and gazed round the room. The furniture screened the two watchers, and he fancied himself alone. He raised a pillow at his back, and reclining upon it in the placid calm of exhaustion, with his face turned toward the open window, watched the clouds as they crossed the blue expanse, and indulged in a half-conscious reverie. Where had he been? Where was he? Had he passed the dark valley of the shadow of death, and were there angel forms in those snow-white clouds beckoning him away? What was that confused sound which rang in his ears? Was it the murmuring of the dark stream as it washed upon the untrodden shore?

No: there was the little room where he had taken his lodgings; there was the green paper on the wall with the large grape clusters; there was the sound of human voices in the street And the consciousness that he was alive, restored, flashed upon him with something of the bewildering astonishment and joy which Lazarus must have felt when he heard the

words, "Come forth."

Too weak to rise, he was not too weak to pray. Claspings his hands together, and gazing up into the clear blue sky, from whence all clouds were now dispersing, he poured out his overflowing heart in thanksgiving.

He spoke with God. The tremulous voice gained strength, the power of faith and hope grew intensified, and he prayed with that love and fervour which the grateful child of a heavenly Parent can only feel.

Mrs. Weston and Mr. Brunton were paralyzed with astonishment; instinctively they shrank from disturbing that solemn time by coming forward to speak with George and letting him recognise them; but with a united impulse, both quietly and solemnly knelt down and joined in the song of thanksgiving.

Theirs was joy unspeakable; tears poured down both faces, and hushed sobs of rejoicing burst from their hearts. All their prayers and earnest longings had been answered; all their sorrow was turned into joy; and that Friend of friends, whose delights are with the children of men, had ordered, according to the tender mercy of His loving heart, all the evil into overwhelming good.

Presently the voice ceased; and, exhausted with the effort, George lay down in calm and blissful tranquillity to sleep.

As Mrs. Weston rose from her knees, her dress touched a book on the table, which fell to the ground. George was roused by the sound, and, trying to draw aside the curtain, said,--

"Is that you, Mrs. Murdoch?"

Mrs. Weston, although dreading the consequences of excitement, could restrain no longer the yearning of her motherly heart to embrace her son.

"No, George, my dearest boy, it is your mother."

"Mother! mother!" cried George, with the old former-day voice of love and joy, passionately kissing the face of beaming happiness bent over him, "Thank God you are here!"

From that day George began rapidly to improve. The excitement produced by the discovery that he had been sought and found, instead of doing him injury, relieved his already-oppressed mind from a weight of care. Every day brought fresh strength, and as he sat up in bed, carefully propped up by pillows, with his uncle on one hand and his mother on the other, he told them all the sorrowful and joyful details of his strange experiences until the eventful morning when his strength gave way.

"This is beginning life afresh, in every sense," he said; "here am I, a poor mortal, almost helpless, just strong enough to know how weak I am;

and before me--if my life is spared--lies an untrodden path. But I begin my restored life, through God's infinite mercy, with a new inner life; and He who has given me that, will, I know, freely give me all things that shall be for my good."

Mrs. Weston never knew the fulness of joy before those days. Her only son, in whom all her brightest earthly hopes were centred, had ever been a source of deep anxiety to her. Her never-ceasing prayer had been that he might be what he now was--a child of her Father; and in the realization of her heart's desire she found such joy unspeakable, that all the cares and troubles of long, weary years seemed as though they had not been.

George was soon sufficiently restored to be able to leave his bed and sit up for a few hours on the sofa. The day for this trial of strength having been definitely fixed by the doctor, Mrs. Weston wrote at once to Hardy, inviting him, if he could manage to get away, to come down and celebrate the event.

The meeting between the two friends was as joyful as their parting had been sorrowful.

"George, my dear old boy," said Hardy, as he shook him by the hand, "it does my eyesight good to see you again."

"And it does my heart good to see you, old fellow," replied George, as he returned the pressure. "You don't know how I have longed for your coming, that I might tell you how deeply grateful I am to you for all your brotherly love--"

"Good-bye, George," said Hardy, taking up his hat and buttoning his coat; "I won't stay another minute unless you give over talking such stuff. What I've done! Why, if my pup, Gip, were to run away, I should do for him what I have done for you--no more, no less. So let us drop the subject, that's a good fellow, and then I'll sit down and chat with you."

Never was there a pleasanter chat by any little party than by that which assembled in Mrs. Murdoch's best parlour that evening. All hearts were full of thankfulness, and though there were some painful subjects discussed, yet the joyful ones far more than counterbalanced them.

Mr. Brunton found out, in the course of the evening, that he had something very important to do, and probably Mrs. Weston discovered her assistance was needed as well, for the friends found themselves, after a while, alone, which was what they both wanted.

"You have heard, Hardy, of all the strange things that have happened to me?" George began, hesitatingly. "I should like to be able to tell you all about them; but, somehow, I don't know how to put such matters into words."

"You mean, George, that one great, solemn, joyful event which has made

your life now something worth living for," said Hardy, relieving him of a difficulty. "I cannot tell you how glad I am to know it. The past two years have been funny ones to both of us. Religion has been ground on which we have not been able to tread together, as you know: but, thank goodness, that has all gone by. Now, I must tell you my mind, George," he continued, in that frank, manly way which was so natural to him; "I never gave you credit for sincerity when you took up with those strange notions which were so dangerous to you. I believed then that they were convenient principles, which might be stretched and made to agree with the dictates of your inclination. I do not say you did not believe what you professed, but I always thought that you forced yourself into that belief by self-deception. Now, wait, don't interrupt me. I know what you are going to say; but whatever harm you did to others--God only knows that--I do not think your change in sentiment did any harm to me! For this reason--I saw you were not straightforward with your own heart, and I felt sure you slighted that pure and holy religion in which we had been instructed from childhood, not because in your heart of hearts you disbelieved it, but because it condemned that course of conduct which you were pursuing. Now, was it not so?"

"Yes, Hardy, you are right. I can trace out now the processes of thought through which I passed, to lead me to think and act as I did; and I never knew before what a wretchedly poor thing a morally endowed, intelligent human being is in his own strength. I did not know how weak I was. I did feel sometimes oppressed with the idea that I was willingly blindfolding myself--but, somehow, an argument was always at hand to weigh down this feeling. But tell me why you think my endeavours to make you believe as I did never did you injury? God grant they may not to others."

"Why, when I observed you, as I tell you I did, it was impossible for me not to be on my guard. Nay, more, this question tormented me daily, 'You believe George disregards religion, because it condemns him; if you regard that religion, but do not practise it, does it not condemn you?' Now this was a home-thrust, George, which I could not parry off. I tried to determine not to be such a cowardly, mean-spirited creature as to try and cheat God by pretending to believe Him, and yet fight under false colours against Him; and so I gave up many of my old habits, and tried to start afresh. And now, George, you don't know how thankful I am that you are different to what you were. We have studied many things together, joined in many plans and purposes; and now I hope we shall be able to study the highest and best thing in earth or heaven--what God's will is, and how to do it."

* * * * *

That desire became the watchword of their lives.

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