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THE HERO OF HILL HOUSE

BY MABEL HALE

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THE HERO OF HILL HOUSE

CHAPTER 1

HOME AND MOTHER

It was the evening of a quiet day in late autumn, and the inmates of the little farm home were gathered safely together around the supper-table. I say the family, but they were not all there. Father's place was vacant, for he had gone to town that afternoon and would not be home till late bedtime. His reason for being late was the great shadow over this otherwise happy home. The children, down to baby Doyle, three years old, knew that when he came, he would be in no condition to be seen in the presence of his children, and that money which was needed badly in his home would have been spent for strong drink.

But all the others were there. Mother sat in her place at the foot of the table, and little Doyle sat at her right hand in his high chair. The others were ranged on both sides of the table, leaving the vacant place at the head. There were eight children in all, the eldest a boy of sixteen, and the youngest little Doyle. The three older children were boys, George and Wilbur, sixteen and fifteen years old, respectively, and Austin, aged thirteen. Then were two girls, Amy and Nell. After them came Harry, a fine little fellow of seven, Lila, a tiny girl of five, and last of all the baby.

Every child was robust and rosy, ready for a hearty meal and all the fun that was to be had. Mother sat as queen, a dear, beloved queen, and the children as they talked back and forth in happy freedom turned to her for reference and sanction in all that was said. There was not one but bowed in adoration at the beautiful mother's feet. And her eyes, how lovingly they rested upon them! And how she seemed to be treasuring them in her heart! This was indeed her kingdom, and she was happy. But of course there was a sadness in her happiness, because her husband and the father of her children was choosing a path that took him out of the family circle. But since such was his choice, she was determined to make it up to her lads and lassies to the best of her ability, and throw her teaching and daily instruction against the influence of their father. She was making this evening pleasant that they might forget the shadow that hung over them.

With supper over and the evening chores done, the family gathered about the fireside, some read, the little ones played, and Mother busied with her sewing. An atmosphere of peace rested upon them, in spite of the shadow that hangs over every home into which the demon drink has entered.

"Doyle, Lila, it is time for little people to be in bed. Harry, you have no lessons, you had better go to bed also," said the mother.

"So soon, Mother? May we not play a little longer?"

"Bedtime now, little man, and run along without waiting for more play."

Three little people trooped off to bed to be tucked in a little later after the good-night kisses and evening prayers. Soon the girls went sleepily off to bed with a good-night kiss. Just Mother and her boys were left, and now was the time for a quiet talk with them. A gentle word from her and the conversation was begun.

Softly she led them on till they were telling her of their doings among the boys, and their plans and hopes. It was only a friendly visit, but into it she put wise counsel as well as thoughtful understanding. They wondered, afterward, if she this evening felt the other shadow which at this time was entirely hidden from their eyes, that she should talk to them so. Perhaps she did. We can not know. But deeper than this was her yearning for her sons just entering manhood. She knew that only a little way at best could she go with them, and then they must choose their own path. She wanted the little time left to be filled with those things that would make their pathway light.

The evening passed, and after a time all were in their beds. Only one low light remained, and that was set to guide the father when he should return.

When the father came, if he had been in condition to notice, he would have seen a bare little room now that the mother was out of it, with signs of poverty everywhere. The old table and worn chairs, bare floors scarred with the tread of little feet, the scant cupboard, the worn shoes by the fire, all told how little the queen of the home had to work with. There was nothing of beauty here but herself and her love.

But Henry Hill did not think any of these thoughts. He was already half asleep, and he crawled into his bed without a word or thought for those whom he should have loved and protected. And in the morning each one of the family secretly thanked God that Father had lain down without disturbing them.

The morning brought another day of busy care for Elizabeth Hill. Her hands were full from morning till night helping, lifting the heavy burdens, and directing the work of the children, in all bearing the responsibility of the family.

Was she happy? Yes, in their love, and in the anticipation of the future of her children, especially her boys just entering manhood. Her thoughts were

always with them, and her prayers followed them in all that they did. So much was at stake. Three lives to be made or marred. Three men to bless the world or to curse it. And they had the blight upon them which their father was bringing. Every woman who is a real mother knows that Elizabeth Hill's face was often wet with tears as she contemplated what the future might bring. And happy are the sons who are blessed with such a mother. Her value is untold. The wealth of the world has nothing to compare with her. Yet how often it is taken for granted that she will be as good as she is, and her life made unhappy by the ones for whom she works and prays!

If Elizabeth Hill had known, and if her boys had known, what lay just ahead, perhaps the days would have been made fuller yet of loving counsel and happy association. But the veil was before their faces, and they did not know. Possibly that was best. If the veil were lifted and we knew our future, our hearts might faint within us. It is enough that for each day is given grace for its toils. Elizabeth loved her boys and was giving them the best of herself, and that is all she could have done if she had known.

CHAPTER 2

THE STRICKEN HOME

Henry Hill sat before the fire with his head in his hands and his elbows upon his knees, a picture of utter dejection and sorrow. The house was quiet with an unearthly quietness, those who were compelled to speak using the lowest tones, and tiptoeing about. The little ones, Doyle, Lila, and Harry, were not at home. Amy and Nell were silently, tearfully, trying to wash the few dishes that had been used at the almost untouched breakfast. The boys were attending to the morning chores, with faces as solemn and hearts as heavy as each could carry. A neighbor woman, kind, sympathetic, and busy, but with the same sadness pictured upon her face, kept coming and going between the bedroom and the room in which Mr. Hill sat.

Only that morning the physician had been there and had told them that she whose life had been the light and strength of the home was lying now upon her death-bed, that she would never again rise to take the burdens of life, that they would have to let her go. He had felt for Henry Hill as he had spoken, for the white horror and anguish in the man's face would have called out sympathy from a harder heart; but he wanted to say also that had she been given a lighter load to carry, if some of the anxiety and concern that now stirred his heart had been expressed when his wife was well, things might not now be as they are. But the kind doctor left these words unsaid. Henry Hill had all he could bear without them.

The holidays, with their festivities, were over, and life had just settled back into its every-day way, when Elizabeth Hill fell sick. She had never been ailing before. Her children had always known her as able to take the constant care and oversight of the family. Without her they were helpless and distraught, for there was no one to take her place. And when after one day's illness it became certain that her condition was critical, the anxiety and tension became intense. He who should have lightened her burden

long ago now awoke to her need and was constantly by her side doing all that was in his power to restore her to health. But the black cloud settled heavier upon the home as each day saw the mother coming nearer the gates of death. The children looked at one another with pale faces and wide, frightened eyes as they saw the kind neighbor women come from their mother's bed with averted faces.

Though all was done that could be done, they could not hold her, and one night, with her weeping family around her, she loosed from her earthly habitation and went away. She who had been the soul of that home, lay dead. The calamity came upon the family like a shock. It left no spirit nor life in them. They knew not which way to turn. From the father down to Baby Doyle they were bereft. She to whom they had always looked for counsel and guidance lay in a sublime sleep from which they could not waken her.

As Henry Hill looked upon the motionless form of the woman whose love and confidence he had gained and who had been to him such a faithful wife in spite of his fickleness, he wept, and vowed; but what are tears and vows when the will has been weakened by self-indulgence? He looked about him helplessly. What was he to do? What could he do without her? He was almost a stranger to his children, and had no idea how to care for them. She had always carried the burden, taken the oversight, been the one to go ahead. He faced the future as helplessly as one of his little children.

Her boys looked upon her and knew that they had lost their best friend. Home would have little more attraction for them. George and Wilbur took selfish comfort in the thought that they were old and strong enough to care for themselves, but Austin forgot himself in wondering what would become of the children. The little ones spoke to Mama, but she did not answer, they called to her, but she did not hear, and they went away weeping; for though they could not tell what, they knew something dreadful had happened.

Kind friends and neighbors came in and did what has to be done at such a time. They pitied with full hearts the afflicted family, and they wept for their friend, for they too had loved her. They took her and laid her with others of death's sleepers in the silent churchyard, and her orphaned children returned with their helpless father to the lonely and broken home.

Only those who have returned home after Mother is gone know what these children and father suffered. Kind hands had put the house in order and the familiar furniture in its accustomed place, endeavoring to make the house look as if all were well. But they could not bring back the one who had made this house home, and to the children it was a dreary, lonely place. Fearfully they crept out-of-doors, only to find it as cheerless there.

That first night around the fireside without her, what a desolate place it was! The father sat with drooped head and heaving breast, and the children huddled together and some of them sobbed. Just to escape their misery they went early to bed, and little pillows were wet with tears. When they were all in bed a gentle hand tucked them in with a kind caress. "It is what Mother would have done," thought Austin, as he made the rounds.

In those first days of sorrow every one seemed to remember only his own

heartache: but hearts can not always lie broken; in a little while they began to live again.

It was now, when life was dropping back into its old ways, that the greatness of their calamity became apparent. If Henry Hill had understood his opportunity, he might have stepped into his children's affections and been a true father to them. But he forgot them in his own self-pity. He was lonely, unspeakably lonely, and the house was dreary and dull without Mother. He who had always sought first of all his own pleasure and comfort now reached out for solace somewhere. And he found it with his old associates in his old haunts. When he returned to his home after these seasons he found the gloom and emptiness there more hard to bear. He hated with a deeper hatred the feeling of responsibility and care that was thrust upon him by the sight of his motherless children. He felt himself sinking under the strain, and he longed to ease himself in some way. If only a friend had been found to take the burden and bear it, how gladly would he have relinquished his place; but there was no one who would accept it. The neighbors were willing to help him with the children, but none of them were willing to do his part, and they waited for him to take the place that a father should.

George and Wilbur were restless at home since their mother was no longer there. It had been her influence that had kept them at home and in school for some time, and now she was not there they felt free to go when they wished, and they were out of the home in a short while. Night after night when the shadows crept over the fields, only Austin was at home with the children. It was he who cooked their meals and waited upon them. He loved them with a yearning love, thinking always of their mother and how she had labored for them. He was a boy thoughtful beyond his age, and, looking ahead, he saw what probably lay in store for them. To him home meant all, and the thought of the children's being scattered, never to know the sweetness of home association, was more than he could bear.

Added to his own feelings in the matter was the thought of his mother. If she knew, how it would grieve her to have her babies among strangers, and possibly to be ill-treated! Austin believed also that his father would be glad to see the home circle broken and the children scattered. It seemed that there was but one person to stand between the children and a broken home, and that person was himself. Though but a boy of thirteen he dedicated himself to them with a determination to stand by them and keep the home together. He put out of his mind every thought of following the example of his brothers, and settled himself to the care of the children. When he had made this decision, it seemed to him that his mother was near and was well pleased with what he had done. The children were quick to recognize in him their true friend and champion, and turned to him as if he had been their mother. So it was not long till apparently home was running along as smoothly as ever. Of course those living there felt a terrible void, which never could be filled.

Austin's father looked on with secret satisfaction at the course the boy was taking, glad that some one, if only this child, was willing to carry the responsibility of home. Day after day, as the household settled back into order and harmony, he felt his burden slipping; but the loss of his

wife was as keenly before him as ever. He had loved her as much as he was capable of loving any one, and he felt the loss of her. Now that Austin was doing so well with the children he determined to get away from it all for a while.

"Austin, you could get along very well with the children if I were to be gone a few weeks, could you not?" he asked one day. "I am not feeling well, and it is so lonely here that I am not myself. Perhaps if I could have an outing, I should be better able to endure it."

CHAPTER 3

AUSTIN AND HIS FATHER

Though Austin was but a child, he knew that his father was acting very selfishly in going away at this time, and that his real desire for going was to avoid responsibility rather than to cure loneliness. Many thoughts pressed in upon the boy as he contemplated his father's long absence, but the thought that gave him an answer was that if he refused, the home might be broken up. He seemed to see his mother's face, and it encouraged him to be brave. It was only a moment that he hesitated in answering, "Yes, Papa, I think I could manage all right; I might have to miss school part of the time."

"Well, I shall go with some of the boys down into the hills for a while to see if I can not get straightened out so that I shall be more fit for work. Your uncle John will look after you and see that nothing happens to you."

So the matter was settled. In a few days Henry Hill was off for a month of pleasure, leaving the children in Austin's care. He was right in thinking that his brother-in-law, John Moore, would look after the children. Mr. Moore was a brother to the children's mother and had the same noble principles as she had. He would gladly have taken the entire care of the children, but he thought it was their father's place to have their oversight, so stood back and said little. But when he knew they were left alone in the farmhouse, he was careful to know each morning and evening that all was well with them.

"Austin is as steady and reliable as a little old man," said his uncle after one of his visits. "He manages things over there as well as many an older person could."

"How a father could put so much on a mere child is a mystery," said some of the neighbor women.

"I would hate to be tied to a kitchen and a row of babies like he is," was his cousin Frank's opinion.

But of all these comments Austin was ignorant, nor did he think he was doing anything brave. He was doing the one thing that would keep the children together, and was encouraged with the thought that his mother was

pleased with him, for it seemed to him that she knew.

Though Henry Hill was a selfish man, he often thought of his children while away, but stifled every remorseful thought with the assurance that Austin was taking good care of them. He assured himself that they were getting along as well as if an older person were with them; and this was true, for in the month that he was away, nothing of enough importance for comment occurred. The days went by as evenly as if the father had been there. But if Henry Hill thought that his mind would be more settled by his absence, he was disappointed; for as soon as he was again in sight of the house, the old loathing of the place attacked him. He longed to be away from it all forever. And when a man has all his life given way to his own personal impulses rather than stand by his duty, you need not expect him to brace up at a time like this and do his part.

From the point of reasoning which Mr. Hill took he was justifiable in feeling as he did. Everything about the little farmhouse reminded him of the woman he had loved. He never came to the house without a pang of painful loneliness at her absence. He felt himself incapable of caring for the children. She had always done that, and he did not know what they needed nor why. It would be better both for him and the children to be away from this dreary, grief-laden spot. But he could not take the children with him, and what would he do with them if he did? But there was Austin. Why should he feel tied to the children when Austin was willing to look after them? The thing to do was to get out and find a more suitable place, leaving Austin to look after home and the little ones.

But it would be pretty hard to leave so many children on one boy. The neighbors would have a great deal to say. Maybe he had better get a place for some of them. But where could he find a place? Why, to be sure--why had he not thought of that before?--he would take Lila and Doyle to his mother's, and Austin could manage the rest. That was just the thing, and no one could find fault with the arrangement, at least no one who knew Austin. And reasoning thus, he had his plans all made before he mentioned them. The sunny, pleasant days of spring had come, and the air was balmy and sweet with the perfume of blossoms, making the vagrant soul of Henry Hill sick with wanderlust, and he could hardly wait to put his plans into action.

"Austin, I believe I shall take Lola and Doyle out to your grandmother's, and try to get work there," he said one morning at the breakfast-table.

"You can stay on here with the other children, and can get along very well if I am gone all summer. It will make it easier for you if I have the little ones."

Austin's chin dropped, and he looked at his father in blank amazement. Surely he had heard wrong. He started to protest, but another suggestion stopped him. "If I refuse, he will take all the children away, and we shall have no home; that would grieve Mother," mused the boy. Because Austin hesitated in answering, his father continued to explain his plan. "If I find a good job I shall get a house and send for the rest of you children and we shall live near your grandmother and uncles. I believe we can do better there than here." And having said this, he waited for Austin to speak.

"Yes, I suppose we could manage to get along a while," the boy said, choking a little. How lonely and bare his path looked before him he could not explain, and intuition told him it would be useless for him to try to do so. His father seemed to forget that he was lonely too, and missed the gentle mother.

Little more was said on the subject, but Mr. Hill arranged his affairs and, taking the two younger children with him, went to a distant State, leaving Austin and his two sisters and younger brother to look out for themselves for an indefinite period.

John Moore and his wife were shocked beyond measure when they learned Mr. Hill's plans, but knowing that it would be useless for them to remonstrate, they said nothing. However, they vowed in their hearts to look after the orphans in their father's absence. But there was one feature of his father's absence that Austin had not told any one. Had his uncle John known this, he would have been more than angry with his brother-in-law. Henry Hill had not left sufficient means with Austin for the care of the children. He had needed a neat sum for his fare and had taken almost all from the family purse, promising to send something back to Austin soon. One week had passed, and a second, and although a letter had come announcing their safe arrival, nothing had been said about money. The little home was becoming bare of food, and Austin did not wish to tell his circumstances to any one. He would have to find a way to make money for himself.

The neighborhood in which he lived abounded in market-gardens, and Austin decided to get work in the garden of a neighbor, with permission to bring the children with him and allow them to work what they could also. All of them together would be able to support themselves till their father found work and should help them again. With Austin to decide was to act, and the very next morning he went to the house of Mr. Long and asked for work. Mr. Long had been observing the boy and liked his pluck, and gave him work as he wished.

Now began a new epoch with Austin. There was a feeling of independence in making and using his own money that was very pleasant. He did not wonder that the older boys had gotten out to do for themselves. Though he had to rise early and work late to keep up his house-work and home chores, and his field-work, he did not count it a hardship. He felt manly and strong in doing it.

Mr. Hill smiled with pleasure when he read in Austin's letters of the arrangements he had made and how well they were getting along. That was just the thing. With the wages of the children they would not need much from him, and he would have more for himself. There was no need of Austin's having more than was actually necessary, and that would not be much. It was certainly fortunate that Austin had such a head for business.

But the best-laid plans sometimes prove to have a flaw, and this was unpleasantly true in this case. Though Mr. Hill explained at length to his parents how nicely Austin was getting along, he could not make them think all was well. They seemed to think, and others were of the same mind,

that he was neglecting his duty.

"Who has the care of the children?" his mother asked him one day.

"Austin is looking after them," was the easy reply.

"You do not mean to say you left that boy with the care of the children," she exclaimed in amazement.

"Why, Mother, he manages them fine. I was gone a month a while back and everything was running along all right when I came home, and he had Lila and Doyle then, also."

"It is asking too much of the child, and I do not see how you can do it," was the sharp reply. "I will send for them as soon as I get enough ahead to set up housekeeping," promised Mr. Hill.

"Henry, when are you going to bring those children here?" she asked of him a few weeks later.

"Austin is working there and the others are helping him, and they are getting on so well I hate to bother them," he answered.

CHAPTER 4

AUSTIN GOES TO HIS FATHER

One evening Austin and the children were coming home from their work in the gardens, tired and lonely. They could not get used to coming to the house so quiet and empty. Home was not as it used to be, but the brave children were making the best of it.

"I wonder if there will be a letter from Papa," Amy said as they drew near the mail-box, "and if he has a new home for us yet. I should like to see Grandma, and I do want to see Doyle and Lila." Harry, running on ahead, reached into the box and drew out a letter, at sight of which the other children quickened their steps. It was addressed to Austin and was in their father's handwriting:

"Dear Austin, I have gotten things in shape to have you children come to me. I will send you tickets in a few days. In the meantime dispose of the things in the house excepting what you can bring in your trunks. Uncle John will help you do this and see that you get started all right. Write me a card early enough so that I shall know when to meet you. We are all well.
Henry Hill."

Austin was trembling all over with excitement mingled with tears. He was glad for the change, for the loneliness was nearly killing him, but he hated to leave Uncle John and his family, and all the neighbors, and Mother's grave. He had almost ceased to hope that his father would send for them, but here was the letter at last.

Henry Hill was careless, we must admit, in his duty, but he was not careless of the opinions of others. He had been stung to the quick more than once by the insinuations and admonitions of his parents and acquaintances that he was not doing his duty by his children. His mother especially nagged him about it. He might have passed her words off as the whims of childishness, but she was not alone in her condemnations.

"Henry, you are not doing right. Austin is only a little boy and you are laying on him too great a burden," she would say.

"That is where you are mistaken, Mother. Austin is as tall as I am, and plenty strong enough to do all he is doing. They are getting along fine. Austin says so in his letters," he would answer.

"You are not doing right," retorted his mother, and her tones implied more than her words.

It seemed strange to Mr. Hill that he could not make any one understand the situation. Austin had been willing to stay. He had expressed no reluctance at all, and every week brought a letter from the children telling how well they were getting along. He was not hurt by any remorse at their words, but it seemed to him that they were unnecessarily partial to Austin in their judgment, and he felt a sort of animosity toward him on that account. Austin was only doing his duty by the children, so why should he be so praised and pitied? But a man can not long stand the bite of a fly without flinching, and Henry Hill found that he must do something to rid himself of these criticisms. He hated to do it, but he would have to send for the children and again set up housekeeping.

"O Elizabeth," he thought, "why did you have to be taken from me when I need you so much? If you were here, I would not have all this to bear. You made my life easy and happy."

It was with satisfaction that Mother Hill listened to her son explain that he had already sent for the children and must look for a house for them.

After a hasty toilet and a little to eat the children took the letter over to Uncle John's. Mr. Moore read it through, then sat still for a while without comment. At last he spoke, "What does Henry mean by laying such heavy responsibility upon the boy? No instructions, no plans! One would think he believed Austin to be of age."

"I suppose the only thing, Austin, for you to do is to make ready to go to him as your father tells us to do. I shall be glad to render you all the assistance possible. But I hate to see you go. If you remained here I could look after you and see that you get along all right. But it is not for me to say how your father shall manage his affairs." If John Moore expressed a little bitterness in addressing the boy, he kept back most of what he felt. He knew the habit of drink that bound his brother-in-law, and how it was weakening his manhood, and he doubted either the interest or the capability of the man to care for the children. He was certain a great deal of responsibility would rest upon Austin, and he feared the father would not

always be just with him. But he wisely kept all these doubtful thoughts to himself and helped the boy prepare for the journey.

The children were up early the next morning for their last day of work in the gardens of Mr. Long. That gentleman was much concerned when Austin told him of the letter and their plans.

"Austin," he said, "you are a brave boy, and one that can be trusted. I am going to ask you to promise me one thing. When you are with your father again, do not follow in his steps. Your father has habits that are no good to him, and would only ruin your life."

"Mr. Long, I promised Mother long ago that I would never touch a drop of liquor," said Austin, knowing well what the man meant.

"Good for you, Austin; stand by that decision as long as you live, and it will be well with you."

Uncle John and Aunt Tillie were true to their promise about helping the children prepare for the journey. They spent much of the time with the children, and when the little house was empty of its furniture, they took them to their own home till time for them to go. Every day they heaped Austin with advice and counsel. The children heard them talking to him telling him just how to make the changes on their journey and how to arrange the baggage, and how to conduct themselves, and it filled them with respect for their brother. They felt safe in his care and certain that he would bring them safely to their father once more.

"Austin," said his uncle one day, "there is one promise I wish you to make me. You are a good boy and have started out the right way to make a noble man. I want you to say that you will not follow in your father's footsteps. He is not the man he would have been without drink. He caused your mother many heartaches. You will promise?"

"I promised Mama that before she died, and I will always keep it," answered Austin with feeling.

"I do not know how things will go when you are gone from here, but I tell you now, boy, that if you ever need a friend or find yourself out of a home, let me know, and I will send you money to come to us. I am sorry you are going so far away. I want to see that you have a chance to make good in life."

To the neglected, over-burdened boy these tender words were like a balm to his heart. He felt no sense of protection from his father, and he missed his mother always. At times it seemed that his load was too heavy for him to bear. Yet to his father he would make no complaint, lest the home be broken up. He loved the children tenderly for their own sake, and with a deeper love yet for her sake who had been called away from them. Sometimes he had to forget that he was a boy and look ahead and think like a man.

"Austin, we hear you are going to your father. We are glad of it, but, boy, take the advice of a friend of your father's, do not follow his footsteps.

He is a good fellow and we like him, but he would have been a better man to his family if he never had learned to drink. It would never do you any good," said Pete Dykes one day.

Pete was one of his father's cronies, and this advice surprized Austin.

"Pete is right in that. You are better off if you never learn to drink," said Sam Phipps, Pete's companion.

"I have that settled and mean to stay by my decision," answered Austin while his eyes rested on the two men in pity.

At last the day came to start, and everything was ready for the journey. They would be at least a day and a night on the way, and would have to change in the heart of a great city, but Austin was certain that by following his uncle's careful directions they would get along all right. They started to the station early so that they should have time to stop and speak to the neighbors who would be at their gates to bid the children farewell. The eyes of the neighborhood were upon the children, and many expressions of disapproval of their father's management were made. Also the kind people remembered with genuine sorrow the loss of their friend and neighbor, Elizabeth Hill. Tears wet honest faces as the people bade the children good-by.

Uncle John and Aunt Tillie stood with their arms about the children as the great engine drew near, and clasped them once more to their bosoms in a last caress, then they were on the train and away. This journey was like their first month alone, too uneventful to deserve any comment. Their father was at the station to meet them and took them directly to their grandfather's home. As this home was too small to accommodate them long, their new home was waiting for them. Grandmother Hill received them with open arms. She felt much more contented to have them where she could know all was well. Lila and Doyle were delighted beyond measure to see their sisters and brothers, especially Austin. In all it was a most happy reunion, and it was with satisfaction that they went on down to the little cottage that had been prepared for them.

CHAPTER 5

HUMILIATION FOR AUSTIN

His experience in the gardens of Mr. Long had a direct effect upon both Austin and his father. To Austin, whose manly feelings were early awakening, there was an untold sweetness in handling his own money. He found a keen pleasure in this that gave him a thirst for money-making, which was certain to assert itself at the first opportunity. No longer could he be satisfied in the house doing merely woman's work. He wanted to be a bread-winner also. He felt proud not to depend entirely upon his father.

His father was as enthusiastic as Austin at the anticipation of his making

money, but the father's enthusiasm lay in the fact that so long as Austin was making money it would take less from him for the support of the family. To one who longed to spend upon himself and his accursed drink all that he could obtain, the supplying of a family of seven with food and clothes was no small burden. Henry Hill was not a common workman, but was capable of making good money, and had been favored with an opening which brought in plenty for the needs of his family. It was not necessary that they be in cramped circumstances. But when the support of his family had been taken from his wages, it left but a small margin for his personal pleasure, and he hated sacrifice. While Austin could not make a man's wages, what he did earn helped remarkably in the family expenses.

The satisfaction of Austin and his father was mutual--though prompted by very different motives--when Austin obtained a position in one of the village stores. At this time he was just past fourteen, stood nearly six feet tall, and was well proportioned for his height. Many men were no taller nor heavier than he, but he lacked the strength of a full-grown man.

Amy and Nell were little misses of twelve and ten, pretty, dainty girls, full of life and activity. Their mother had begun their education in housework, and they had helped Austin since he had been taking the lead. They knew how to do all the simple household duties needful for their humble home. They could also cook simple meals quite well, and so far as knowledge of proceedings was concerned were able to keep up the housework. Austin was at home in the morning and evening and oversaw their work, helping with the heavier part. Working thus together they got along very well. But you must not suppose that these children were able to keep their home as an older person would have done. Always there was lacking the mother-touch.

When Austin saw how well the girls did, he felt satisfied to go to the store each morning, and his wages were sufficient to supply the family with plenty of good, wholesome food. His father was glad to have him do this, and withheld his own money, allowing Austin to assume the responsibility. Seeing that all was going so well, he would be away days at a time, and always when he returned everything was prospering.

Mr. Hill was apparently contented for a short while, but soon he had another attack of wanderlust, and, giving up his good position, he went into an adjoining State where an oil-boom was on and much work was to be had. He left the family as before in Austin's care, and also this time failed to provide means for their support while he was gone. He was sure Austin would find a way to keep things going. Austin was thankful for his work and that he could keep the home up, and stayed steadily at his place every day.

"Does Austin Hill work here?" asked a gentleman of the proprietor of the store one afternoon.

"Yes. He is in the back of the store now. I will call him. Austin." The boy answered, coming in immediately.

Taking him to one side, the man looked him over sharply and said: "I am a

welfare officer and have received complaints about your family. I am told that your father is away and that the children are not being properly supported, in fact that they lack the food they should have. Is this a fact?"

Poor Austin! he stood in amazement, his face growing red and white by turns. He had been priding himself that he could do a man's part by the children, and had been elated at his success, and here the people thought he was starving them! When he could find words, he answered, "It is not true, I assure you. My father is away, but he has not been gone long, and in that time we have had plenty. At this time the house is well stocked with food, as you will find if you search it. Go see for yourself that this report is not true."

"No, I do not want to do that. I only want to know that the children are having plenty," the man replied.

"But I want you to go. I want you to know that it is not true. If you do not wish to go alone, take my aunt with you. She lives near by," Austin urged.

"Well, Austin, for your sake I will investigate. I am sorry I have wounded you so much, but I had to do something about it," he answered.

An hour later the officer was again in the store to see Austin. "I found the reports to be utterly false," he said. "If every family in town were as well supplied as yours, some people would live better." Austin's heart felt sick, and he was almost too ashamed to lift his head as he started for home. He felt disgraced and humiliated in the eyes of his neighbors. That it had been one of them who had uttered the complaint he was certain, but which one could be so base and false he could not guess. Never before had he had occasion to think he had enemies. Till now every one had seemed to be full of faith in him. What had he done to break their confidence? Not once did it occur to him that even if the reports had been true, he would not have been to blame. No one was accusing him of not doing his duty. It was evident that he was doing all he could. Nor did he stop to consider that to the minds of the people it was inconsistent that he, a boy of fourteen, should be supporting a family of six. He took the whole insult upon himself, writhing under the humiliation. He was half tempted to give up trying to care for the children. It looked as if failure was all he could expect.

But determined persistence was one of Austin's strong points, and he set to work to investigate the origin of these reports, and when he found their source, a new difficulty was presented and a real cause for concern made bare. Austin was gone all day long, being at home but a few moments at noon. The children, when not in school, found the house lonely and dull. They had no one to direct their efforts nor to control their impulses, so they came and went as they pleased. Austin had not thought of this difficulty, for till now they had lived in the country.

One of their neighbors had children about the age of the Hill children, and the two families played together much of the time. Amy and Nell, as well as

the younger children, had formed the habit of gadding about among the neighbors, being at home very little. They were especially often found in the kitchen of this near neighbor, and, as one can easily see, the cooking of this woman would taste better to them than what they prepared at home themselves, and they were always glad for anything to eat they could get. This woman noticed the tendency of the children to seize upon any bit of food offered them, and formed her own conclusions. She was a woman who liked excitement, especially the kind caused by gossip, and, going about among the neighbors, she had circulated the reports which finally reached the officer with the result we have just heard.

But the contradictory reports of the officer put things in a different light, which angered her considerably. Why, we can not say, but she and her family vented their chief anger upon Austin. He it was who had discomfited them, and was therefore to blame.

Austin did not spare his reproofs to the children nor his commands as to their behavior in the future. He blamed them for running about as they had. Because he was so little older than the girls, he could not see why they should not feel some of the responsibility that loaded him. He could not sympathize with their carefree and thoughtless ways, and reproved them accordingly. He was indeed finding that the cares of a family man are many.

One evening as he and his family were eating supper, the thick, incoherent voice of a drunken man fell on their ears. Turning to the door, they saw him coming up the walk staggering. Austin stepped to the screen and latched it, not wishing him to come in among the children in that condition. The fellow was in a terrible anger, and, reeling up to the door, he said, "I want you, Austin Hill, to come out here. I am going to whip you for the lies you have been telling on us." Austin recognized him as one of the men from the home of the neighbor who had circulated the evil reports.

"I do not want to fight you. You are in no condition to fight, and I have done nothing to deserve a whipping," said Austin quietly.

"You come out here, you coward, and I will show you how you can put the lie on us as you have. Come out and let us settle this like men," commanded the fellow with horrid oaths.

Seeing he was crazy with drink, Austin said no more; but, making the door safe, he went away and left him alone. The man after a while went back home, and no more was said about it. But this incident depressed Austin all the more. His problem seemed too hard for him to solve. That night his pillow was wet with tears, and he longed for his mother to advise him. Though surrounded by his father's people, he had little help or encouragement from them, for they feared that Henry would depart and leave them the entire responsibility of the children if they assumed any care of them now. They had all confidence in Austin, but very little in the stability of his father.

His aunts were quick to see the mistakes Austin made in the management of the children--and he made many mistakes, for he was too young to have the wisdom to manage such a large family.

No wonder the boy was discouraged and depressed. But one vision strengthened him. Again he thought he saw his mother and that she smiled on him and bade him stand by the children. He took courage and the next morning was ready to face life again. Austin loved the children more and more, and as the responsibilities deepened upon him, he cried out in his heart, "God help me." And the Lord heard that prayer.

CHAPTER 6

TO THE COUNTRY AGAIN

There were in Austin's mind grave doubts as to his being able to manage the children in town. They could not be trusted to do the right thing in his absence, and would be constantly bringing themselves into reproach. That his father could manage them better was doubtful, but it was easier when his father was there. In those days of discouragement Austin was near giving up. But the heaviest load will some time be lifted, and Austin felt his heart grow more light when he received a letter from his father, saying he had obtained work that suited him and had a house ready for the children as soon as they should come to him.

"Why not make the children ready and send them to him and you stay on with your work?" whispered the tempter, and the suggestion sounded good to Austin. Again came the vision of his mother and her desire that he keep the children together. He pitied the poor little things to be left to the mercies of their careless father. He was fast losing all respect for his parent, and he could not bear to let him neglect his mother's precious children.

Again it fell to Austin's lot to make ready for moving; but this time there was no Uncle John to take the oversight. The furniture was to be packed and sent as well as the bedding and clothes. It was a big undertaking, but was finally accomplished. It was with a feeling of relief that Austin left his grandfather's village. His experience with the welfare officer had been too great a humiliation to be soon forgotten.

The town to which his father brought them was full of excitement over an oil-boom, and men were making money fast and spending it just as fast. It was a gathering-place for loafers and gamblers, sin and wickedness abounding on every hand.

Mr. Hill was not located in the town, but had care of engines which kept pumps going out on the field. He was to have a house near his work after a while, but for the present he had a house five miles away. The country was wild and the neighbors few, and Austin saw that he would not be bothered with his children gadding among the neighbors here. That was a consolation, though he grieved to have them so far from a good school.

True to his impulses Austin found work as soon as he was settled in the new home. This time he hired to the farmers who had not all their fall work

done yet. When he could no longer get work among them, he was compelled to remain at home, for he would not go away where he could not keep in touch with the children. But there was plenty to do at home. They wished to farm the next year, and he could prepare the ground this fall; besides, he obtained the privilege of clearing a certain piece of ground for the posts he could get from it. The sale of these posts brought in something, though not so much as if he had been working for wages.

It seemed especially necessary that he be at home with the children at night, for his father was often gone till late and then came home partly under the influence of drink. Austin knew that the children needed his protection.

"Austin," said his father in a surly tone one morning, "why are you lying around home all the time? Why do you not get out and make some money? I have enough to support without doing for you."

"I can not get any work near enough to be at home nights with the children. Besides I am working at those posts," was his answer.

"There is no need of your thinking you must be at home at night. The girls do the work anyway, and you could just as well get out and make something. Go hire yourself to one of the ranchmen along the river. Have some ambition and try to do something for yourself."

How these unkind words stung Austin! He was angry, vowing to himself that if that was all the thanks he was to receive for keeping the ends of the family together he would get out and make money.

That afternoon he visited two or three of the ranchmen, offering himself as a workhand; but when they observed how young he looked, each one asked concerning his age. When they heard that he was but fourteen, they said their work was too heavy for a boy.

"Did you get yourself a job?" asked his father that evening.

"No sir, no one would hire me because I am so young."

"Why did you tell them your age! they would have believed you if you had said you were seventeen."

"But I am not seventeen, and I do not like to tell what is untrue."

"You like an excuse to lie around home. I am getting tired of it, and mean you shall get out and hustle. Do you hear me?"

There had been a few rainy days just before this outbreak of his father's, and Austin had been in the house. But the next morning was sunny, and Austin was again at his chopping, and no more was said till another rainy spell. Then his father attacked him even more roughly, demanding that he get out and find work at once. Austin bore these insults as best he could because of his unwillingness to desert the family.

One Saturday night the father did not come home. After the children were in bed Austin sat up with a queer chill of anxiety in his heart. Something was amiss he was certain, for this was pay-night. He had no doubt but that his father was drinking and gambling with the other fellows in the little town or, worse yet, had gone with some of them down the track a dozen miles to the county-seat. If this were true, he would come home without a cent and be even more angry with Austin for not earning wages.

At last Austin lay down and fell asleep, and he did not waken till day-light. Seeing that his father's bed was not occupied, he knew his worst fears were realized and that his father was in trouble somewhere. The engines needed attention, and if they were neglected his father might lose his job, then where should they be? Touching Harry, who lay at his side, he said, "Harry, wake up and get ready to go with me to see about the engines; Papa did not come home last night, and we shall have to tend them. Amy, Nell, get up and fix us boys some breakfast and a lunch, for we shall have to see about the engines. Papa is not home yet." Hurrying into his clothes, he went out to feed and harness Old Ben, the white horse, which would pull them to the engines.

Two hours later the boys were off in a little open buggy behind poky Old Ben; a cold, drizzling rain was coming down, which wet and chilled them through and through, yet the boys journeyed with light hearts, for so buoyant are the spirits of youth that they can rise above the most unfavorable circumstances. They laughed and sang as the old horse ambled along.

At the first well Austin found the engine still, but with little Harry's help it was soon started.

The second engine, though, would not go. The boys worked with it till they were exhausted, but their efforts were without avail. Some little thing was wrong which neither of them knew how to remedy. As they stepped to the door of the shed to rest a little, to their surprize they heard the sound of voices. They were off from the main road a long way, and in a part of the country where they hardly expected to see any one on this rainy day. Looking in the direction from which the voices came, they saw two men approaching, driving a single horse. At closer range one of the men proved to be their father, and he was in a maudlin condition, reeling back and forth as the buggy bumped along. They could hear the men's voices in ribald laughter and singing. When they were near the building, Mr. Hill climbed clumsily out of the rig, and Austin tried to tell him what the difficulty was.

"Oh, that's nothing," he mumbled, "shoon have it fixed." Reeling as he walked, he went into the shed that sheltered the engine. The boys followed him, and while his mind was clear enough to adjust the engine, his legs were not steady enough to hold him up, and his boys had to hold him to keep him from falling into the machinery while he repaired the engine. It seemed to Austin at this time that he utterly despised his father. He wondered if he could ever feel toward this reeling, staggering, evil-minded man as a son should feel toward a father. Again came the thought of the children and what it would mean to leave them to him. He would not leave them so long as

his father would permit him to remain under the home roof.

Before the hard, cold winter came, they moved into the house near his father's work. It was a lonely place with only a small yard cleared in the brush, and was as desolate a location as one could imagine. Yet the house rang with the laughter of the children, whose changing fortune had not chilled their merry hearts.

Thanksgiving passed as any other day, only that the children spoke of their mother oftener than usual. Even they wondered at all the changes which had come to them since the last Thanksgiving.

There was much damp weather, and Austin was unable to work much in the woods. So every day was made dark with the taunts and threats of his father. Sometimes it seemed to him that he could not stand it another day. He longed to get away, to be forever from the presence of his father, but he could not leave the children. What would become of them if he did? Very well he knew that in less than six months they would be scattered here and yonder, some of them to be abused and mistreated.

His father's insulting manner was bearing fruit in the children, and they were no longer submissive. It seemed to Austin that he had failed entirely.

CHAPTER 7

THE RUNAWAY

It had now rained steadily for a week, and the mud and drip everywhere made all outdoors unpleasant. But in the Hill home the indoors was even more disagreeable. The new home was near the engines. Mr. Hill was in the house much of the time, and he was never pleasant among his children. Austin could not work in the woods because of the rain, and his presence irritated his father all the time. They were never in the house together but what something unpleasant was said between them, and Austin's spirit was becoming worn with the constant rasping. He thought he could not endure it much longer, and since his presence made the home so filled with contention he doubted whether he was doing right to stay.

"Austin, how much longer are you going to lie around this house? You have not done a day's work in weeks. I can't stand your idleness much longer. Why can you not be like your brothers?" growled Mr. Hill one morning a day or two after Thanksgiving.

Austin said nothing, for he had exhausted all his arguments; but at that instant a determination formed itself in his mind to put a stop to the whole affair. When his father had gone to the engine-room he went to the attic and brought down his best suit of clothes and, coming into the kitchen, prepared to brush and press them. When he put the irons on the stove, Amy noticed what he was about to do.

"You can't press those clothes this morning, for I am going to use the

irons," she said in a fretful voice.

"I shall have to use them, Amy, but it will not take long."

"You can't have them, so there! You always want to do just your way, no matter what we want to do."

"Did you hear what Father said this morning?" asked Austin.

"He didn't say any more than he is always saying," she said a little less fretfully.

"He will not have to say anything of the kind again, for I am going to find work and not coming back till I have it," said Austin.

"Austin, you can't go away. What shall we children do!" exclaimed Amy, all her vexation leaving at the thought.

"I do not know; but it can not be much worse than having Father so angry all the time. I will get work on the river if I can, and will see you all as often as possible," answered Austin soothingly.

Amy said no more about the irons, but turned to her dish-washing with tearful eyes, her heart almost standing still at the thought of home without Austin. The other children who had heard the conversation stood about with consternation written on their little faces. Harry, who was a child to act when he thought he might help, hurried out to the engine-room and told his father what had occurred. Henry Hill was vexed because Austin's wages no longer came in; but he had no thought of sending the boy away. He knew too well that Austin's presence was needed in the home. But the seed of animosity that had been sown in his heart against Austin during the past summer was now bearing fruit, and he took a sort of pleasure in annoying the boy. He saw that Austin was sensitive about being dependent and he enjoyed seeing him wince. At Harry's alarm he only grunted a word of disapproval and went on with his work. He believed Austin was only trying to bluff him. He did not think the boy could be driven away from the children.

An hour later Harry was back again at his father's side, his face bathed in tears and his breast heaving with sobs. "Papa, Austin is going. He has his suitcase all packed and is ready to start."

Henry Hill jumped to his feet, his face red with anger. Could it be possible that Austin had such an idea in his head? If so, he would soon frighten it out of him. This looked too much like defiance in the boy!

"I will show him how to run away, the rascal. Harry, go to the barn and bring the buggy whip," and saying this the father rushed across the little opening between the two buildings and stamped into the kitchen. Austin was on his knees fastening his suitcase, which was all packed and ready for his start. He had not meant to bid his father good-by, nor to tell him any of his plans. He was too angry and his heart too defiant to want even to look at him again. When his father came in, Austin rose from his knees and faced

him.

"What is up here, young man? I will let you know right here that there is going to be no running away from this ranch! You get that grip where it belongs, in a hurry," thundered the irate father.

"I am going away to find work. I shall take care of myself from this time on," said the boy resolutely facing the angry man.

"Take care of yourself," sneered his father, "you could not exist a month on your own resources. You take those clothes out of that grip and stop this nonsense!"

"I am going away, and you need not try to hinder me," said Austin in firm, even tones.

A fearful oath escaped the father's lips and he grabbed the whip which the sobbing Harry had brought; for as much as Harry loved Austin he dare not disobey his father's command. Turning again to Austin, the man thundered, "I'll thrash you within an inch of your life. Don't you dare to tell me you are going away when I forbid it. For once you will obey me."

Just then the engine gave a warning sound, which meant that without immediate attention it would stop running, so the enraged man turned about without another word and went out, leaving the frightened children looking after him. But the pause was only for a moment. Austin seized his opportunity and, picking up the suitcase and bidding the children a hasty farewell, he bolted out of the door and across the lot to freedom. He had been running as hard as he could go when still he heard the wails of the children and heard them calling to him. He took a course across the unbroken lands where there was not so much as a foot-path. In his timber-cutting he had become familiar with the lay of the land and took this rough way on purpose that his father might have difficulty in following him. He ran for almost a mile before he slackened his pace, and at every step he seemed to feel his father right behind him. He knew that now his father would be so angry as to have no sense at all, but would beat him nearly to death.

When at the edge of the river-bottom he stopped to take a breath he found that he was wet to the skin and that he had stepped into low places where the water had come up over his shoe-tops. And he remembered too that he had not a penny in his pockets, nor a bite to eat. A more forlorn boy could not be found than Austin as he stood there and looked across to the farmhouses along the river. But he smiled a little to himself as he thought, "I am one fellow who actually ran away from home. It was no walk away."

As he approached the river he found the lowlands much more wet and marshy than it had been in the hills, and he had to wade above his shoes a good deal of the time, and still the heavy drizzle kept up. He made for a farmhouse where he hoped to get work. As he came up he wished in his heart that the man would ask him no questions about his condition; for he saw that besides the wet and mud, he had torn his clothes in several places. But he was determined that if any questions were asked he would tell the

truth, just as it was. He would not shield either his father or himself. His cause should stand upon its own foundation. He believed that almost any one would approve of his leaving home under the circumstances.

He knocked at the farmhouse door, and the man of the house answered his rap and hospitably invited the boy in. It was a temptation; but Austin remembered his sappy condition and did not like to soil the housewife's floors, so refused to enter.

"I am looking for work. Have you anything I can do?" he said.

"Are you not that Hill boy who wanted work a few weeks back?" asked the man kindly.

"Yes, and you thought you might have something for me later," replied Austin hopefully.

"If you had come yesterday I should have hired you; I found a man over at town last night, and he will be here today to begin. I am sorry I did not know you were still wanting the place."

With a heavy heart Austin turned from the door and journeyed on in the rain and mud. He had little hope of getting work at any of the other farms, and he did not know where to go. But he determined to do his best in seeking employment, and so stopped at every house he passed, asking the same question.

At last he reached the river at a place where a foot-bridge crossed it. To cross this bridge seemed to him to be cutting off the last retreat home. Here he must make his final decision. He stood with one foot on the bridge and one hand on the railing and pondered. Should he go on, or should he go back and face his father? He knew the taunts he would receive even if he were not beaten; but he would bear all that if it was his duty. Then there came to his mind the picture of his father that day he had come home after his drunken spree and found the boys trying to start the engine. At the thought his loathing of his father overcame him, and he turned and walked across the bridge. Never would he go back to live in the same house with that drunken fellow. If Henry Hill had realized the effect his life was having on his children even he would have considered.

CHAPTER 8

WAYSIDE FRIENDS

Now that Austin had cut his last shore-line, had crossed the bridge away from home, he began to plan for himself. It was now past noon, and he was both hungry and cold. When he thought of his penniless condition a chill of apprehension came over him, for he had no mind to beg. He continued his search for work on this side the river, but with as little success. Though he could hardly have told why, he had kept on toward the railroad, and was approaching it where a small station stood. He had no money with which to

buy a ticket, yet he hoped that in some way he might be able to follow the road to where he could find work.

When he reached the station he found no depot and only a few houses; a box car had been set beside the track and in it was a tiny waiting-room with a fire burning. A couple of men sat idly by smoking and talking, scarcely noticing when the boy came in. Austin was thoroughly tired out, more hungry than he had ever been in his life, and chilled to the bone. His feet had been wet all day, and he had not a dry stitch of clothing on him. Setting the suitcase down, he sank upon the rude bench at the side of the room and hardly moved for a long time. The early twilight of the gloomy evening came on, and still he sat, with a thoughtful, far-away look in his eyes. He did not know what to do next.

After a while the ticket agent came in. Seeing the boy sit in such a dejected position and without moving for a long time, he guessed that he was in trouble and in need of help.

"Where are you going, sir?" he asked Austin kindly.

"I hardly know. I have been looking for work among the farmers all day and none of them want to hire me, and I hardly know what to do next," said Austin.

"Do you live near here?"

"Yes, I have walked from home today; but I do not want to go back if I can avoid it. I want to find work."

"Had some trouble?"

At this question Austin looked around, and seeing that they were now alone and feeling certain that the man was kindly disposed toward him he told him all, shielding neither his father nor himself. It was so evident that he told the truth that the man believed him.

"Have you any means, or any way of making your expenses while you are looking for work?" was the next question.

"No sir, I have no money, and only want to get work. I have a friend at the next town whom I am quite certain would help me if I could only find him."

"Have you anything about you that you could sell if you got into a pinch?" again asked the man.

"Not a thing unless it would be this," and he held up a pocket-knife, which had been a gift of his mother's.

"If you will give me the knife I will give you your supper and a ticket to the next station," tactfully proposed the man, not wishing to make Austin feel like a beggar.

Accepting the offer he was taken to a little restaurant and given a good

supper, and before it had grown much later he had a ticket and was aboard the train bound for the town where his friend was at work. Austin had taken opportunity while waiting for the train to change his clothes, and he now presented a much better appearance than when he was sitting by the little box-car fire.

When Austin left the train it was dark, and had been for some time. He had been so tired as the train bounded along that he hardly sensed his position. Dimly he had wondered where he would sleep that night. Now he stood for a moment on the little station platform wondering what he should do next. He did not know where to find his friend and was not certain he was here at all. This had been his only hope of finding work, and now he realized it had been a very forlorn one. Since he was here he must find the man or stay out in the cold all night. He saw the light of a hotel across the street. Going there, he asked if they knew his friend; but his friend was a stranger to them. He inquired about other hotels and rooming-houses, and was directed to two or three, which he visited with as little success. Standing again in the outside darkness he pondered what to do. He thought perhaps his friend might be known at the livery stable, and going there he asked again. The stableman knew no such a fellow, and by the flickering lantern-light he saw the look of disappointment and concern that crossed Austin's face.

"Where are you going to stay tonight?" he asked.

"I do not know. I have made no inquiry about it, hoping to find my friend," the boy replied.

"Every house in town is full; some folks will have to sit up at the hotel for lack of a bed. I have no idea where to tell you to go." Then after a moment's thought he added, "I could fix you a place here in the barn where you would be comfortable, and welcome."

"Thank you, sir; but, to be honest, I have no money to pay for even that bed," truthfully replied Austin.

"Well, a fellow can't stay out in the cold a night like this. Prepare to roll in and maybe you will have better luck tomorrow," good-naturedly replied the man, and taking an armful of rugs he went to an oat-bin and spread them out and left Austin to get to rest as soon as possible.

Though this was a novel bed to the boy, and the surroundings new and strange, so weary was he that he was soon fast asleep. It was morning when he awakened, but not yet light. He heard the man in the barn with the horses, so jumping up hastily he dressed and went out to help him, with the hope that he could remain and work about the barn, though this was not the kind of work he had wished for.

"Have you need of a hand around the barn?" he asked the man after a while. "If you have I should like a job."

"No, I can manage all there is to do very well," was the discouraging reply.

"Do you know of any work around here I could get?"

"Not a thing. You are most too young to stand the work in the oil-fields, and that is about all there is to do this time of year. I shall go over to the house now for my breakfast, and you look after things while I am gone and then you may go get yours," said the man, who felt genuine pity for the boy.

Austin enjoyed the warm breakfast and the kindness of the housewife who gave it to him. Before he left, the man handed him almost a dollar in change, another act of kindness.

Taking his suitcase again in his hand Austin proceeded on his uncertain journey. The money the stableman had given him would be sufficient to carry him to the village where his grandparents lived, and as he had heard that Wilbur was there, he decided to cease looking for his friend and go on to his grandparents' home and get assistance from his brother. He thought this would be only fair, for Wilbur had borne no responsibility, while he himself had given all his wages for the support of the family.

"Why, Austin!" exclaimed his grandmother when he came to her door. "Can this be you! I did not know you intended coming. How did you leave the children!"

"Everybody is well, thank you," primly replied Austin; for he was always a little afraid of his sharp-spoken grandmother. "Papa thought he could get along without me for a while, so I am looking for work. Do you know where I could find Wilbur? Perhaps he could help me get something right away."

"Will is in town somewhere; I see little of him. You come in and spend the night with us, and hunt him in the morning."

Austin spent a pleasant evening with the old folks; but he told them nothing of the trouble between him and his father, lest they might detain him and send word to his father where to find him. The next morning he found his brother, who was as surprized to see him as the grandparents had been.

"Hello, kid, how are the folks?" he had greeted him in a jolly tone.

"All right. Papa thought he could get on without me for a while, so I am looking for work. Do you know where I can get any?"

"No, I do not know of a thing. There is not much around here that is light enough for a kid," replied Wilbur, who felt his two years' superiority very much.

"Well, then, could you let me have some money to keep me till I do find work? I am completely broke and have not been able to get a thing to do."

"I'm sorry, Austin, but I am in the same fix. I lost on a game last night, and it left me in bad shape. I would let you have it if I could."

Austin did not remain with his brother long. He felt sick at heart to think he had so soon turned to the very course his mother had warned him against. From the flippant remarks Wilbur made it was plain he was sowing his wild oats with a reckless hand.

Though in the village where many of his father's people lived, Austin felt as lonely as he had the day before in the little box car beside the railroad. Thoughtfully he walked down toward the depot, wondering what to do. He had no heart to look for work. At the depot he met a young fellow of a friendly disposition who seemed disposed to talk with him. It took but a little probing by this smooth fellow to get from Austin all his story; for the boy was entirely unacquainted with the ways of the world. And to his new friend the whole thing seemed a joke. He confided to Austin that he was in nearly the same predicament, but that he knew a way to ride about the country without funds. Austin had heard of such things but did not know how it was done, and showed some interest; and the young man proceeded to explain to him the tricks of his trade, for he was by profession a loafer, a tramp.

That what the young man did was wrong, Austin knew; but he was so kind and engaging in his manner, and seemed to be such a friend just when Austin needed a friend very much, Austin consented to go with him on his next trip, which he intended beginning that very afternoon. Presently another young fellow of the same type as Austin's new found friend joined them, and the three boys waited at a convenient place for boarding a box car without being noticed.

CHAPTER 9

THE CAPTAIN'S GUEST

It is hard to explain Austin's feelings at this time. He had a tender conscience and knew he was doing wrong; but he was penniless and so in need of a friend, and this young man had showed him kindness, and a way out of his difficulty. He kept promising himself that only this once would he be guilty of such a deed. He would get work as soon as possible. And he thought of the children. It seemed impossible that he had been gone from them only two days.

But the boys were not so successful as they had hoped to be in boarding the train and were able to get into only an open coal-car. Here they had to lie down till the train was out of the station, when they sat up and looked around. It was not long till they became painfully aware that the journey would not be taken in comfort. A strong wind was blowing and, after the rainy spell, it had turned cold. None of the boys had heavy coats, and the wind cut them through and through. It seemed to Austin that he would freeze to death. They huddled together to keep themselves warm. The older fellows laughed at the trouble they were in, for they were hardened to it. But to Austin, who was used to the shelter of home, it seemed horrible. Never will he forget that cold ride.

Added to his physical discomforts was the mental consciousness of wrong-doing.

Just at nightfall the boys climbed out of their uncomfortable carriage in the freight-yards of a thriving town some fifty or sixty miles north of their starting-point. Austin was so chilled he could hardly walk, but managed to follow the other fellows up-town. It is needless to say that his initiation into the life of a "bum" was not pleasant. But his companions seemed not to mind their discomfort, and he trudged along with them. When they reached town, they first got something warm to eat, then inquired for a place to stay. The man of whom they asked understood their circumstances, for he had seen many of their kind, and directed them to the auditorium in the city park as the most likely place they would find. This building had been made for the convenience of public speaking, not for a dormitory, and was a very poor place to stay on a cold night. It had walls on only the east and north, but afforded a shelter from the force of the cold north wind. The boys had no bedding, and had to keep themselves warm by building small fires of the leaves and sticks they could pick up in the dark, and by walking. It seemed to Austin that he would never see the night through; but finally morning came. He was again treated to a warm meal by his friend, and then they parted company with the third member of their crowd. Austin and his companion decided to strike out on foot to the next town. This pleased Austin, for he hoped to get work somewhere along the way. They had not gone far until it was plain that his companion was not looking for work, but for adventure. Austin wished he had not fallen into such company. However, after the kindness the boy had shown him he could not turn from him coldly.

At noon the boys stopped at a farmhouse for dinner. They were not posing as tramps, but offered to pay for their meal. The family with whom they stopped was a lively, jolly one, and the glimpse of home-life Austin got made his heart ache. He longed to tell the kind man all his troubles but had no opportunity, for his companion led all the conversation telling the farmer and his boys a long and brilliant tale of his travels. He posed as a rich young fellow traveling in the present manner only for the novelty. Austin had a poor opinion of his methods and modes of travel, and decided that his companion was a cheap braggart, and nothing more.

After the noon's entertainment the boys tramped on, Austin longing for something solid to base his plans upon, his companion evidently contented with his vagabond life. Night found them in a town twenty miles north of the place from which they had started in the morning, and penniless.

But Austin's friend knew what to do. His first inquiry was for the Salvation Army, and being directed to the home of Captain Albright, they knocked at his hospitable door. He invited them in and made them welcome, asking them few questions about themselves. But the young man was inclined to talk and told the Captain how he had been converted in an Army meeting two nights before and what a glorious experience it was. Austin looked at him in astonishment and disgust. He knew now what kind of fellow he was traveling with--one who would lie about holy things for a bed and something to eat. The shame and mortification he felt were so keen that he could

hardly look up while his companion enlarged to the Captain on his religious experience.

In the morning, after the boys had had a good night's rest and had eaten a hearty breakfast, good Captain Albright took them into his front room and read and prayed with them, then gave them some kind advice before they should go on their way.

"Boys, the kind of life you are now living does not pay. You are both young and strong and able to work, and you had better get something to do and stay with it and make men of yourselves. You are building now for all time and you can hardly afford to waste all your young manhood."

Austin was a quiet boy, and it was hard for him to speak, especially when his companion was so quick to occupy all the opportunity for conversation. All the morning he had been trying to get a chance to explain himself and get help from the Captain in finding work. Now was his chance, and he seized it, for his companion was silent on the subject of work.

"That is just what I want, sir. I am not used to this kind of life and I do not like it at all. Do you know where I could find work?"

"Right, my boy. You are welcome to remain with us till you can find something. Have you anything in mind you wish to do?"

"I have an uncle who has always been kind to me, and he promised to send me money and help me if I ever needed help, but as yet I have found no place to stay until I can hear from him."

"You are welcome to make your home with us until you can hear from him, and I advise you to write today," said the Captain.

Austin was only too glad to accept this offer and to part company with his doubtful friend. He took the postal card the captain gave him and hurriedly wrote his cry of distress and got it into the morning mail. His heart was now light, and he expected a reply in three or four days at the longest. In the meantime he made himself as useful as possible in the household of the kind Captain.

After a week a letter came to the Captain's address, but it was for _Wilbur_ Hill instead of Austin. This puzzled Austin somewhat, but feeling certain it was meant for him, he opened it. The letter proved to be from his cousin Frank, and was in answer to his card.

"Will," the letter ran, "start east right away, working your way as best you can, and when you are nearer, I will help you." Austin was perplexed and not at all pleased. He did not wish to try any more penniless traveling. Three days of that had been enough for him. And that his uncle should fail in his promise seemed indeed unlike Uncle John.

Austin wrote again to his uncle, a letter this time, explaining the situation more clearly, and asking that the money be sent for his fare and promising to return it when he had work. His hopes had rallied much in

writing the letter, and he was sure a more favorable answer would come soon. While he waited, he helped Captain Albright as much as he could. The Army people were making ready for their Christmas celebration, and found plenty for Austin's willing hands to do. Much food and old clothing had been donated to the Captain for distribution among the poor, and to Austin was given the task of gathering this together. He was happy in doing this, feeling that he was at least earning his board. But he could not understand why an answer to his letter should not come. Three weeks passed since he first came into Captain Albright's home, yet his uncle did not send him money nor acknowledge his letter.

One day a telegram came to him saying a ticket was at the office for him, and the message was signed by his uncle. Joy almost to distraction filled the boy's heart as he rushed to the depot to see if it were truly so.

It was only a day or two till Christmas, and Austin had consented to fill quite a large place on the program for the entertainment, but he could not wait now that his message had come. Captain Albright had been sorry for Austin in his perplexity and rejoiced with him in the good news, and released him from his part on Christmas Eve.

When Austin reached the great city on his way home, he was told that his train had gone and he could not get another till the next day. The fast train, which would pass through his uncle's town, stood then on the track; but it would not stop. Austin was getting wise in traveling and believed he could not get into anything out of which there would be no escape; so if he could once get on the fast train, he would trust luck to get him off. Dodging past the gatekeeper, he boarded this train. The conductor told him the train could not stop, but Austin waited to see what would happen. He had no money to stay in a hotel, and he wanted to get to his old home very much anyway. Shortly before they reached the village, the conductor told him the train would stop just outside for water.

CHAPTER 10

WITH UNCLE JOHN AGAIN

It was noon, Christmas Day, when Austin stepped from the train at the watering-station just outside his old home village. Oh, the joy of familiar sights! He felt as if he should like to stoop and kiss the very earth under his feet, he was so glad to be at home again. He had not gone far till he saw familiar faces, but he did not stop, though all were glad to see him back again. His one thought was to see once more his beloved uncle. He hurried on, swinging his suitcase in his hand. For some reason it seemed much lighter than at other stages in his journey. He could hardly keep his feet on the ground, so light was his heart as he sped along.

At last the old farmhouse came in sight, and about the door were his cousins, who were wondering if Austin could have come on that train. They were expecting him any time and had a hearty welcome for him when he did come. Aunt Tillie had the Christmas dinner just ready to sit down to when

the glad cry of the children announced Austin's arrival. All of them were at home that day to celebrate their last Christmas in the old house, for their father had sold the homestead and they were to move the coming week. It was with joy that the extra plate was laid for the wanderer.

"Well, well, Austin! you are here at last! I suppose you thought we never intended to answer your letter," said Uncle John laughing.

"I could not help wondering why you waited so long," answered Austin reproachfully, for he still felt grieved at his uncle's neglect.

"Look at this and tell me if you wonder that I did not answer it," said Uncle John bringing out the card Austin had written him from Captain Albright's home three weeks before. To Austin's surprize it was unsigned.

"How was I to know who wrote this?" asked his uncle with twinkling eyes, "you will have to sign your name if you want money from me."

"I do not see how I came to do anything like that," said Austin, abashed at his mistake.

"We never suspected you, and after talking it over at the supper-table we all came to the conclusion that the card was from Wilbur, and that he had gotten into some trouble and wanted help. He is so trifling that I decided to let him fight his own battles, so paid no more attention to the matter," explained his uncle.

"I felt sorry for the poor fellow so after a week or more wrote the letter you received," said Frank, laughing.

"Then your answer came back to us all signed as it should be, but I thought it was Will trying to trick me further, so still did nothing. In fact, I had about forgotten the incident when a letter came from Amy telling us you had left home. Then we knew the S. O. S. was your call and waked immediately. That is why there was the long silence then the ticket by telegram. We were afraid you had given up hearing from us and left that place."

When Uncle John had finished his explanation, all that had been dark to Austin cleared away, and he laughed with the rest at the queer mix-up. It relieved him to know that after all his uncle had not purposely neglected him.

And that dinner! Was there ever another feast as good as this one? It was indeed a table to tempt an appetite under any circumstances, and to Austin, who had absolute peace of mind for the first time in weeks, it seemed more delicious than could be expressed.

But before he had finished his dinner, thoughts of the little ones at home and the Christmas dinner cooked by inexperienced hands came into his view, and his own good fortune almost choked him. If only they, too, could have eaten with Aunt Tillie! And he remembered, also, that only last Christmas Mother was with them, and tears sprang to his eyes. How much had happened

in that year!

When the others had gone about their own affairs, John Moore took his young nephew and had a long talk with him. Austin was free to tell him all that had happened and why he had left home. Mr. Moore could understand how Henry Hill had treated the boy, for he too had received evil for good at his hands. He was sorry for the little ones, but hoped the sight of their needs would waken the chords of real manhood which once stirred the heart of his brother-in-law.

"Austin, I am pained at all you tell me and am sorry that it is going so ill with dear Elizabeth's children, but I can not see it our duty to bear your father's burdens. You are welcome here with us. To me you are like one of my own sons, and I want you to feel as the weeks go by that you are at home. I shall do by you just as I do by them."

Tears filled Austin's eyes at the kindness of his uncle, but the stinging words of his father rang in his ears, "You could not exist a month on your own resources," and he was determined to make his own way and prove to him that he could do for himself.

"No, Uncle John, I can not do that, though I appreciate your offer. I did not come here to live off your money, but I want to find work and support myself. I am strong enough to do it, and now that I have no care of the children I can do it I am certain."

"But, Austin, a boy like you should be in school. You are not yet fifteen, and for a year you have not been in school to speak of. You can stay right here and go every day," urged Mr. Moore.

"No, Uncle, I do not want to do that now. I am almost out of clothing. All I possess is in that suitcase, and I need to earn something for myself right away. Besides, Papa said I could not look out for myself." persisted Austin.

"Humph! Well, if that is what is on your mind, I do not blame you for going to work. Prove that you can take care of yourself and after that look out for other things," said Mr. Moore in hearty sympathy with the boy for resenting his father's taunt.

"I wish none of you would write anything home about me. I do not want Papa to know where I am nor one thing about my affairs."

"All right; I will inform the others of your wish. It will be hard on the children, but as for Henry, he ought to do a little worrying."

The next week was a busy one for the Moore household, and Austin helped them with their moving, staying with them till the hard work was over, and then found himself a place. This was not hard, for he was well known and universally liked. Those who would hire him knew him to be reliable beyond his years. The wages he received were small, pitifully so, but they were sufficient to again clothe him suitably, and to give him that feeling of independence and self-respect that is good for any boy.

Though he was satisfied with his present lot so far as his own self was concerned, his mind was never at rest about the children. In spirit he lived constantly with them, and was ever longing to return to them and bear their burdens. Not once did he contemplate entirely forsaking them. He believed the cloud which now overshadowed him and them would pass away and he again be welcome under the home roof. He built great air-castles of the time when he should become rich and return and care for them. But he could not overcome the feeling of repugnance toward his father, nor did he really try to do so.

When Austin had again fitted himself with a suitable wardrobe, he remembered his uncle's advice about going to school. Spring was at hand now, and the country-school term at a close, so he could do nothing for the present. But when Mr. Coles, a neighbor of his uncle's, offered him a place for the summer at reasonable wages with the understanding that when the summer was over he might remain with him and attend school the coming winter, Austin thought it wise to accept the offer, though the wages were considerably less than he could have gotten elsewhere. He thought that the lesser wage which Mr. Coles paid him would make his board right for the coming winter, and he did not wish to get something for nothing.

So Austin all through the hot summer months worked away on the farm, of Mr. Coles, doing anything and everything there was to be done. He plowed and sowed and reaped, milked, and fed the calves and pigs, and worked in the garden and orchard. Mr. Coles had a willing hand all the summer through.

CHAPTER 11

AUSTIN TAKES CARE OF HIMSELF

Some men set a high value upon honor, others will sell themselves for a trifle. The value of a man is not one whit higher than the value he sets on his honor. Some men scorn to be dishonest in the small affairs of life, and as friends and neighbors are ever upright and honorable, yet can be tempted in greater matters to sell their birthright for the gain of the profiteer or the influence of the politician. Other men abhor these greater forms of dishonor, but in little things are petty and mean. They are like the woman who prides herself on her cleverness when she cheats the milkman out of a quart of milk or the peddler out of a paper of pins. When a boy undertakes to look out for himself, he must learn to deal with these petty meannesses in others or be continually deceived.

Austin met the world with no expectation of fraud or ill will, and when he found these, he was surprized and grieved, and was quite unprepared to cope with the situation. His first summer's work was to teach him a rather severe lesson in human nature. Farmer Coles knew the boy and that he was a good worker, and deliberately planned to get a farm-hand at a very reasonable rate. He was careful to see that Austin earned fully every dollar he received all the summer through, but he had no intention of keeping him during the winter. When school began the first of September,

there was yet much to be done in the fields, and Austin consented, at the farmer's suggestion, to keep at his work for another month, but the first of October he quit and started to school.

From the time he entered school, the atmosphere about the home, and Mr. Cole's attitude toward his choreboy, changed completely. Where he had been pleasant, he now was surly and cross. He found fault with all that Austin did, and it seemed impossible to please him in anything.

One evening Mr. Coles told Austin to get out the car and have it lighted and ready, for he intended to go to a neighbor's. This Austin did, carrying out with him a few matches to light the car-lamps. He had intended to take the surplus matches back to the kitchen, but as Mr. Coles came out ready to start, Austin forgot them. It was a thing forbidden about the Coles' premises that a hired man should carry matches in his pockets. Mr. Coles had been particular about this rule, and thus far Austin had not offended.

When they were ready to start for home, Mr. Coles had trouble in lighting his lamps, and his last match blew out. He was in the act of going in for another supply from his neighbor when Austin remembered those in his pocket and handed him one.

"Carrying matches, Austin?" asked the farmer sharply.

"No, not ordinarily, but I had two or three left from lighting the car this evening and had not yet carried them back to the kitchen."

"See that you dispose of them at once when we get back." But it was late and Austin was sleepy and again he forgot. He did not think of them till early in the morning while he was helping with the milking. His lantern went out, and he had started to the house for a match when he remembered those in his pocket, and, taking one out, struck it and lighted his lantern. Now the farmer had the excuse he was looking for. He had no intention of giving the boy his board all winter. Far was that from his mind. He had not liked to turn him out without a cause, but rather to make life so uncomfortable for him that he would not stay. Not till now had he found a real cause for an outburst of wrath, and using his opportunity to its fullest extent, he railed out at Austin, using abusive language.

"I am sorry, Mr. Coles, that I forgot to take the matches from my pocket, but you know very well that I do not smoke and have no need of them about me. Also you know how I came to have these at this time," said Austin hotly, for his anger burned at the language and accusations heaped upon him.

Mr. Coles' retort had been more bitter than ever, and Austin picked up the milk-bucket and lantern and walked out of the barn and to the house. Here he strained the milk, put away the lantern, washed himself, and went to his room, never saying a word to the farmer's wife, who looked at him wonderingly because he had come to the house before the chores were finished. He did not come down to breakfast, for he was too angry to eat at the same table with Mr. Coles. A little later he was ready, and coming down-stairs with his suitcase, he stopped to bid Mrs. Coles good-by.

"Why, Austin, what does this mean? You are not leaving us!"

"Yes, Mr. Coles and I have had trouble, and I will not stay any longer."

"Come, come, Austin, you are hasty. You kept your part of the agreement all summer, now do not leave as if we drove you off."

"Mr. Coles knows he has been unjust," said Austin going on out.

There were those who knew Mr. Coles to be the man he proved himself, and were not surprised when Austin gave up the place. One person who understood perfectly was Harry Coles, the farmer's nephew. He was a young married man just starting in life. The help that Austin could give night and morning was just what Harry needed with his milking and other chores, and here Austin found a home at once.

This family was congenial, and Austin was soon settled and steady at his school-work. He was made to feel that what he did fully paid for what he received and that he was not in any way an object of charity. As the weeks moved on so smoothly and pleasantly, Austin also made good progress in school. But his very happiness made him more sad when he thought of the children. How his surroundings contrasted with theirs! While he was enjoying such kindness at the hands of these friends, he knew they were being neglected.

Though he had never written home, and they knew nothing about him, he kept in pretty good touch with their affairs through the letters the girls wrote to their cousins. In every one they had spoken of him, and when cold weather came on, the burden of their letters was for Austin.

After Austin left, his father had hired a woman to keep house for a while, but she did not stay long. Help such as he needed was hard to get, and he had not been able to procure another housekeeper. The girls were hardly old enough to understand how to keep all the ends of the housework going, and their father was as helpless as they. Home had gone in a most haphazard manner. Mr. Hill had encouraged the children to accept places to work as they had been offered. It was only occasionally that they were all at home together. A sense of love and loyalty for home was fading out of their minds, as was also the sense of moral obligation. The younger children were becoming rebellious and evil-minded. All this Austin read between the lines of the letters. His heart ached as he thought of his dear mother and how different it would have been had she lived. He would be jolly all the evening with Harry and his wife, but when he lay upon his bed, his pillow was often wet with his tears. As yet, though, he could not see it his duty to go home.

"Where do you suppose Austin is? Does he ever think of home? I wonder if he is yet alive. Have you heard anything of him?" wrote Amy in one of her letters.

"Do not worry about Austin," her uncle had written in reply; "he is able to care for himself, and I am certain he is getting on all right."

"Listen to what Uncle John says about Austin," said Amy as she read the letter, "I have an idea he is with Uncle John, else he would not be so confident he is all right."

Henry Hill read the letter carefully. He wanted Austin, he needed him. He had his lesson and would not nag the boy any more. While Austin was patient, it was plain to be seen that he would not stand to be trampled on. Thinking it all over, he decided to send a letter to his brother-in-law that would bring the boy home if he were there. It was not to be a harsh or authoritative letter, but an appeal for the children. He knew Austin would come home if he had assurance of better treatment.

While these matters were being worked out in the Hill home, Austin was tasting of pleasures which were to make him see life in a new light. We can not always see the plan of the Master in all his dealings with us, but afterward we look back and know that when the way seemed darkest and the path before us the most dim, the hand of God was guiding all the way.

CHAPTER 12

THE REVIVAL

Only those who have lived in a rural community can realize the place in the social life of the people the revival holds. In the city and larger town the movies and theaters with other places of amusement and social activities fill up the time, but here the occasional picnic, party, or dance is the only form of social diversion, and the younger people become starved for somewhere to go and something to do. And the older people, while they enjoy the spiritual enlivenment of the revival, also come under the power of social enjoyment and give themselves over to a season of communion together.

The little village at the edge of which Harry Coles lived was the center socially of the farming region round about, and the little church of the village the center of the village life. Joseph Bennet, pastor of the congregation, was a spiritual-minded man who had the interests of the people at heart. His life had been clean and sincere, and every one had confidence in him, so when he planned to begin a revival early in the winter, the entire community was ready to lend him assistance with their interest and presence. From the first this meeting gave promise of more than ordinary success. It was not a big meeting because of the work of some talented and eloquent evangelist, but was the joint effort of pastor and people striving under God's hand to be a blessing to their community. The preaching was simple but plain and earnest and carried conviction to the hearts of the hearers.

Pastor Bennet was a wise man in many ways, and to enlist the interest and cooperation of the younger folk he formed a choir wholly of young people and gave them a place in the front of the building. This gave them a feeling of responsibility and overcame to a great extent the possibility of

inattention or irreverence on their part. He thought it gave him a better chance of winning them for Christ, and that was his special aim in the meetings, the winning of souls for Christ.

Austin was interested in the meeting from the first, and was a regular attendant. And when he was invited to join the choir, he accepted, though he confessed himself a poor singer. Pastor Bennet was interested in this quiet boy and spoke to him at different times about giving his heart to God. Also Austin's Sunday-school teacher, who was organist, was particularly interested in Austin and often spoke to him of his soul's need. His place in the choir put him near her, and he was often conscious of her prayers for him.

Though Austin had always been an obedient boy and was extremely conscientious in all he did, he had never professed faith in Christ. He had always been conscious of the will and desire of his mother and had sought to walk pleasing to her, rather than to acknowledge his allegiance to God. But in the perplexities of the past year since his mother had been away he had often blindly called out to God for help and had felt that God did help and strengthen him. But now, as he sat under the preaching of God's word, he became conscious of a longing in his soul that only acquaintance with God could satisfy. He desired with all his heart to be a Christian.

But the same obstacles stood in his way that hinder the spiritual progress of other boys. He was timid, extremely so, and the thought of going forward and kneeling with the other seekers at the altar of prayer frightened him. And he feared he could not hold out if he did start, which would be worse than not starting at all. There was the possibility of ridicule and mockery that he might receive at the hands of others, which, made the way look fearful. So, halting between two opinions, he waited from night to night before he at last made his decision.

The meeting was the one great subject of conversation in the home where he lived. Though none of the family were professors, all of them were in sympathy with the meeting, all respected the pastor and wished him success, and all honestly believed that it was better for any person to "make a start," as they expressed it. They were all genuinely pleased when Nell Purdy's brother and John Finley's son, Sam, forsook their wild ways and "joined church." And they watched closely to see who else of their neighbors and friends seemed to be most interested and might before the meeting closed "make a start." If one of them had to remain away, he was always eager to inquire of the others how the meeting was and who "went forward." And the Coles home was a sample of all the homes in the neighborhood. There was no doubt but that the meeting was getting hold of the people in a way to bring lasting good.

One night Austin stood singing with the others the touching invitation hymn, when he noticed that Theo Kelsey, who stood next to him, was trembling violently. Austin's own heart beat faster as he saw Theo thinking seriously of his soul's salvation. The organist, looking up, saw the concern and interest written on each boyish face and silently prayed as she played. Another worker saw, too, and came and talked to the boys, but both shook their heads at her invitation; however, when she was gone, Theo said

in a whisper to Austin, "I will go if you will."

"All right," said Austin, hardly thinking Theo would have the courage to walk out past the others to the place of prayer. But Theo was in earnest and hesitating but a moment he walked past Austin and the others to the altar. Austin was a boy to keep his promise, and it had been only timidity that had kept him away from the place of prayer for several nights, and he too stepped forward just behind Theo.

He bowed himself at the end of the altar almost at his Sunday-school teacher's feet, and she left her post at the organ at once and knelt beside him. At first he was bewildered and could hardly breathe for the wild beating of his heart, but in a little while he remembered why he was there and the promises of God to those who come to him. His teacher was by his side to instruct and teach him, and in only a short time he felt in his heart that God had forgiven him for his past sins, and that he was His child. A sweet sensation of peace and quiet filled his heart, and he rose from his knees a new creature. Some who had been converted had shouted aloud the praises of God, but he did not feel like doing that. When the Pastor spoke to him a little later and asked him if he had received that which he sought, he smiled and said he thought he had.

"Then be ready to tell to others what God has done for you," said Pastor Bennet as he passed on to speak to another.

Before the services closed opportunity was given for those who had found the Lord to testify of his love, and Austin, true to his natural principles of honesty and sincerity, rose and, in very trembling tones, told that he believed Jesus saved him.

Austin had been the only member of the Coles household to go to church that night, and the next morning he said nothing to the family about what had happened to him, but went on about his chores as usual. When Harry, while they were busy milking, asked him who had gone forward, Austin spoke of two or three whom he had seen go before he went, but said nothing about himself. He was not ashamed, but he was yet very timid. That night Harry soon saw that Austin was among the converts. He chided him a little when they reached home again for not telling him about it, but added kindly, "Stay with it, Austin. It is the best thing any man can do."

The meeting soon closed, but Pastor Bennet, being a wise man, as we have said, set to work finding something for the young converts to do. He did not find them all ready to begin active service, but in Austin Hill he found a young Christian who, though timid, was ready to do all he could for God's glory. The Pastor instructed him to use every opportunity for prayer and testimony, and Austin, following this advice, was soon bold to move forward when the others were yet standing back timidly. His prayers and testimonies he knew to be often poorly worded, and at times he was tempted with the thought that they did no one any good, but he remembered that they were doing him good and exercised himself accordingly.

At the first business meeting of the church after the new members were taken in, Austin was elected as assistant class-leader. He did not refuse

the place, but went to his pastor puzzled.

"I am young, only a boy, and many in the congregation are old men. How could I lead a meeting? It is all I can do to testify, and I am afraid I will make poor success."

"I know you are young, Austin, but you are earnest, and the Lord will help you. All that is necessary on your part anyway is to be here and see that the meeting starts on time, and read a portion of Scripture, possibly with a few comments. You need not feel you must preach a sermon. And, for a little hint--the best leader is the one who can get others to do something," said his pastor in reply.

CHAPTER 13

THE YOUNG CHURCH-MEMBER

The congregation in the village was not supplied with a pastor all its own, Mr. Bennet also served another church. He seldom could be with the village church on prayer-meeting night, so the responsibility that fell upon the class-leader was increased. Also it so happened that the man who was acknowledged as class-leader had fallen back in his religious life until he needed the excitement of a big meeting to stir him up to diligence. Austin already knew when he was elected as assistant that to him would fall most of the meetings, for Deacon Bond was seldom there.

The advice given by the Pastor was of great service to Austin, and following it he sought out each week some one who was willing to read a portion of the Word and give the few comments necessary. He was proving himself a good leader for the meetings, and Pastor Bennet took a real delight in him.

Before many weeks the time for the quarterly meeting had once more rolled around, and the presiding elder was guest of the Pastor. He had come in late on prayer-meeting evening and went with Brother Bennet to the meeting. Both men had spent the day in travel and conversation and were quite weary, and they knew the congregation was not expecting them and had expected to have their meeting without the pastor's presence. Therefore they insisted, when Austin came to them to offer them the charge of the meeting, that he go ahead as had been planned, as if no preacher were present.

Austin carried this word back to the old brother who had promised to read the Word that evening, but he fainted in spirit at sight of two preachers and would do nothing. There was no way but that the young class-leader take the meeting, which he did with fair success and a rich blessing to his own soul. This little incident was always a source of much encouragement to Austin in his life as a Christian, for in it he learned that if he did his duty, God would help him through.

It was perhaps March or April when Austin went to his uncle's to spend a few hours. As soon as he arrived, they brought him Amy's latest letter. It

bore a special message for him.

"Is Austin there?" she asked. "If he is tell him to come home. We all want him so much, and Papa says he wishes he would come," and continuing she told how much he was needed.

Austin listened while they read the letter to him, and all the family watched his face to see what he would think about it. He sat quietly a while, a great light coming into his face. This was what he had been waiting for, and praying for--word that his father wanted him to come. He knew that if he went home without such word, his father would taunt him about it, but that if he waited till his father humbled himself ever so little he would be spared that trial.

School-time for the spring was nearly over, and Austin, in the quick mental survey which he took of his affairs while the letter was being read, thought he could easily sacrifice the few remaining weeks. If he could have followed his own impulses, he would have set off that night, but such a step was not practical.

"I shall go home at once, Uncle John. I have thought for a long time that I ought to go, and this letter makes me certain."

"I am glad that is your decision, Austin, and while we shall miss you, your aunt and I shall feel much better satisfied about the children if you are with them. I have not liked the way Henry has been managing them. It is not a good thing for children to have too many homes," replied Mr. Moore.

"I wish I could start tonight, but I can hardly do that. I shall spend next Sunday with them, see if I don't," said Austin with his face beaming.

Strong as the home cords were pulling, Austin found it hard to say farewell to his many friends where he was. Especially had his life in the village congregation been most sweet. The Pastor had been encouraging him in Christian service, and deep in Austin's heart was a desire to be of real use in the Master's vineyard. He wondered if some time he might not, like good Pastor Bennet, preach the gospel. His efforts in the class meetings had given him a boldness and confidence that was making him a leader among them in other ways. He had a Sunday-school class, which would miss him very much. All these things Austin considered that night after he had gone to bed, and found that even his joy for going would be mixed with regret at leaving his church home.

After talking the whole matter over frankly with Uncle John, Austin had returned to his boarding-place in the home of Harry Coles and told Harry and his wife his new plans. They sympathized with him, for they had known something of his homesick longings, but they were sorry to lose his comradeship out of their home, for they had grown to love him.

"You had better see your school term through. You may never have another chance," Harry suggested.

"I can not do it, Harry. I should be no good in school after this. I must

go at once. I would start tonight if I could get ready," said Austin, his face shining with animation.

His school-teacher was sorry to lose her earnest, faithful pupil and told him so. He found himself regretting leaving her who had made his path clear through the winter's study.

Saying good-by to Pastor Bennet proved to be quite an undertaking. Austin did not realize how he had learned to love this friend, nor all that his pastor had been to him; but now, as he stood before him for the last time, his lips trembled and his heart sank. Who would give him the advice and council so needed by every young Christian? To whom should he go in times of spiritual darkness and perplexity?

"Austin, you will have peculiar trials in your father's home, for you tell me he is not only unsaved, but a drinking man also. If you settle it in your heart to be a bold witness for Christ from the beginning, you will have little trouble with discouragements from him. Be bold and determined and keep your faith strong in God, and you will be able to meet the hardest trials."

"Brother Bennet, Christ is needed in my father's house. I mean to do my duty by the children, and if possible lead them to the Savior. I will neither turn back nor give up, and by God's grace I shall be bold to speak for Him when I ought. Pray for me that I may be able to prove myself a real Christian."

"Another thing, Austin, seek out some spiritual people and meet with them regularly. It is far more difficult to live a Christian life without the encouragement of fellow travelers in the way."

"I promise to do that, and to get the children into Sunday-school as soon as I can," replied the boy.

There was to Austin a great deal of satisfaction in the fact that he should go back to his father with good evidence of having taken care of himself. He left home with only the clothes that he had put into one small suitcase; he returned with two suitcases well packed. Besides this, he had money for his fare home and a goodly sum besides. That this money would go for the needs of the children he very well knew, and possibly for that reason he had been a little more lavish in buying for himself now, while he had it.

Besides thus providing himself with means and clothes, he had been able to get almost a full winter's schooling. This afforded him pleasure, for he realized to some extent the handicap it is to any man to lack in learning. He would have liked to continue in school a while longer, but to him the path of duty pointed plainly back to his charge. Now he had lost the vision of his mother to urge him on to duty and had in her place the will of his God. He possessed a deep feeling of reverence and love for God, and went back to his place of responsibility resolved not to let the influence of unholy surroundings hinder him in the service of his Savior.

The evening came that he was to start for home. Time had slipped by

quickly, for he had been careful not to give himself more time than was actually necessary for his preparations. He stood again at the same little station with Aunt Tillie and Uncle John. Less than two years had passed since he, with the children, had stood there before waiting for the train, but it seemed to him he had lived many times that long. Then he had gone with a child's trust into the unknown future, now he knew to some extent what the trials were before him. Then he had only the vision of his mother as a star to lead him on, now he had the blessed Son of God as his Example and Pattern.

CHAPTER 14

HOME AGAIN

The writing of the letter to Uncle John in which they had so urged that Austin come home had been a great joy to Amy. After she had sent the letter, she began a rather impatient wait for the reply. She believed Austin would come if he was really at Uncle John's, but how could she be sure he was there? For several days her heart beat very fast when she saw the mail-carrier coming, and drooped again when he had gone by without leaving the letter.

They had moved from the place where they had lived when Austin went away and were instead in a house near a thriving town not very far distant. I say they were living here, but in reality the family was broken up, for Henry Hill had fulfilled Austin's greatest fear, and had allowed the children to become scattered till there were none of them at home. Some of them had places to work, while others were staying with friends for accommodation's sake. But the children while they were in the little wayside house had enjoyed it much better than the lonely spot near the oil-fields.

At this time Nell was with a farmer helping his wife in her work. She was given the care of the small children. Harry was working for another farmer, doing what he could to pay for his board.

Amy helped a lady in town part of the time. The little ones were cared for by strangers. Will had come to his father, and the two men worked most of the time, but spent what they earned as rapidly as they earned it. It was hard now to get the drink they both loved, for their State had gone dry. Altogether it was a torn and scattered family Austin was to find on his return.

Amy had not made the best of a success as housekeeper. She hated work in the house, cooking and dish-washing especially. If her father had been more kind, she would have done better, but he was quick to criticize and slow to approve, and she had been glad to see the family scattered that she might be free from the drudgery. Though she was glad for the freedom from responsibility, yet she did not like being drifted about, and longed for Austin. She knew he would lift the load and make it easier for all of them.

One day a young fellow alighted from the passenger-coach with a suitcase in each hand and a look of eagerness in his face. He set out at once to find the little wayside house, and came to it only to find it a bachelor's camp, there being no children about. He inquired and learned where he could find Amy and the little ones.

"Austin! Amy, Amy, look! Isn't that Austin coming?" Lila's excited little voice rang with joy. Amy rushed to the door in time to see the little ones well down the street where a tall man was receiving them with open arms. She knew him at a glance and ran to meet him as fast as they had run. It seemed that she could never take her arms from about his neck. Doyle and Lila were clinging to him, and he was trying to greet them all at once. None of them could get through pressing their rosy lips to his cheeks. If he had had any misgivings as to his welcome, they were quick to dispel them.

"Where are Nell and Harry?" asked Austin when he could get his breath.

"Nell is caring for Mrs. Blaine's children, and Harry is riding Mr. Smith's lead horse," promptly explained Doyle.

"Papa found places for all of us, and we like it better than staying at home alone. It is so lonely without you, Austin. Now we can all come back home again," and Amy's eyes were filled with tears as she looked into her beloved brother's face.

"Well, do not cry now, Sister, for I am at home and to stay. I will not leave you any more. Let us all get on out home and begin housekeeping again," Austin said brusquely to cover his feelings. Tears were on his cheeks, and a choke in his throat as he looked at the little motherless children so joyful to see him. He looked up with a new feeling of responsibility to God, whom he believed was pleased to have him again take the children.

In the next two hours the children tried to tell him all that had happened in his absence, while he listened half abstractedly, trying to plan the course he should take. He could not set up housekeeping permanently without his father's consent and support, but he felt certain that his father meant to do his part. Before the day was done, he had established himself in the little house by the side of the road, and had the three children with him.

"I hear that Austin is home, Nellie," said Mr. Blaine an evening or two later, after he had returned from town.

"Mr. Blaine, is that true? I want to go home right away. I want to see him! I must see him! Are you sure he is home?" and the little face looked up into his tremulously.

"I see I have made a mistake. Mrs. Blaine will be after me for making her nurse-girl dissatisfied," laughed Mr. Blaine.

"I have to see him!" and the child began to cry.

"There, there, don't cry, Nellie. I will be going over that way one of these days and will take you over," soothed the man.

"I can't wait a day or two. I want to see him now. I'll walk home in the morning, I will. I have to see Austin." Nellie had dried her tears instantly at the thought of being put off a few days. Her black eyes were snapping.

"Well, we shall see about it in the morning," and the man passed into the kitchen to wash in preparation for supper.

Nellie's fears were high that Mrs. Blaine might object to letting her go and demand that she remain longer, for she was really needed; but so determined and defiant was she that she would have gladly undertaken the walk across the prairies to her home rather than remain away from her brother.

But Mrs. Blaine understood how Nellie felt, and let her go, and Nell rode with Mr. Blaine, who passed by the Hill home on his way to town. His children's little nurse fairly flew up the path into the house and, bouncing in, sprang into Austin's arms. She sobbed out her joy on his shoulder. Dear little Nell! Austin loved the others, but already he had seen in Nell something of the same devotion to duty and to the younger children that had filled his own heart. Home would mean little to him without her.

Before the week was out Harry had heard and came home to be with Austin. He had them all together again. Home had a new meaning to all of them now. Austin wept with joy at their present happiness and with pity for their past neglect. This was his work, his place in life. He would stay at home now through rough and smooth sailing. They should not be left alone again as they had been. Many were the vows he made in those first few days after his home-coming.

His father had received him kindly, with no reference to his hasty departure nor the cause of it. He seemed satisfied that Austin should take the reins of home government again, and did not openly oppose him in any way, neither did he lend him assistance nor encouragement. Will came over to see his brother, but they had so little in common that he did not remain very long.

Austin found his days filled with active service. He had little time for reverie; but at night when all was quiet, he lay and mused and planned. He was now almost sixteen. He marveled at his undertaking the care of the children as he did when he was but thirteen. The responsibility looked greater to him now than then. He had thought only of their physical comfort then, now he began to consider their spiritual training also. Would he be able to lead them to Christ? What ought he to do first? He looked back over the months since his mother's death and saw that God had led him all the way, and he reached out to his heavenly Father now for guidance and grace.

He remembered his promise to Brother Bennet, and even at their first meal had bidden the children to stop while he asked God's blessing on the food.

The children had looked at him curiously. It had been a little difficult to bow and thank God at the first meal after his father was with them. Henry Hill was not a reverent man, and while he had not openly opposed his son in this pious act, he had gone ahead as if no blessing were being asked. And always since he had ignored completely the fact that Austin said grace at meals. The children waited without prompting for him to finish his prayer. To establish the family altar had been even more difficult, yet he had found time to read and pray with the children. They lent themselves to his ways, for they were glad to have him with them again. But the new order of things in the house proved in time to be very vexing to Henry Hill. Every word and act of his godly son was a stab in his conscience, and as he had no thought of turning to God, he hated accordingly the one who caused his uneasiness. Wilbur laughed at Austin for his queer ways, as he called them, and scoffed and mocked, yet down in his heart respected him. He would not have had his brother different.

CHAPTER 15

THE BATTLE OF TWO WILLS

There were many changes to be made in the Hill household before it could be running smoothly. The children's wardrobe was low, their father being a careless buyer and the girls being inexperienced in making and mending garments. Austin had anticipated this state of affairs when he had so carefully saved his own wages till he should come home. It was not long till his little hoard was gone. He had also had to buy a number of things for the house to make it comfortable and at all homelike.

Henry Hill had a most comfortable feeling to know that there was some one at home who was responsible for the children, so he took many opportunities to be away. In fact he felt better away with some of his friends than when at home with Austin. It is not a pleasant thing for any father to feel that the serious eyes of his own son rest upon him in disapproval and reproof. Every sight of the boy made him feel uncomfortable and as if he did not come up to what was expected of him. Austin was not a fellow to speak out his reproofs, but he thought them and his eyes told what his heart was saying. Every week found him and his parent farther and farther apart--if possible.

Austin expected no sympathy and asked for none from either his brother or father in the way he was taking. He perhaps went to the opposite extreme and was so indifferent to what they thought that it had the effect of antagonizing them. It is at least a fact that there was no feeling of sympathy nor cooperation between them, and that antagonism grew until it was almost open warfare between him and his father. He felt such a repugnance toward his father and a hatred of the way he was taking that it continually showed out in his attitude toward him. In later years Austin could understand, but now he was doing only what he believed necessary to protect his own soul from the discouraging influence.

Partly because he always liked to shirk responsibility, and partly because

he and Austin had so few thoughts and feelings in common, the father stayed away from home more all the time. To this Austin was not averse, for it gave him more time with the children.

While Austin had been gone so long, his father had been in the habit of inviting in men like himself, and they had often played cards and drank till far into the night. Frequently the wee small hours of morning had found them still busy with their cards and bottles. When Austin came home, he could hardly endure to have a thing like this happen with the little children in the house. He had no right to forbid his father, but he did let him know how he felt about it. The result had been that the father felt most uncomfortable to have his associates gather at his home any longer.

Austin usually retired early with the children, and his father became aware of this. He had missed his social evenings with his friends, and wished to have them again, so he had invited three of the "boys" to come rather late, after all the children were in bed, and spend an evening together. It happened that Austin had gone out that evening and did not get back till late. When he came in, he was much surprized to find the four men occupying the kitchen-table with their cards. They had also in some way obtained drink.

With a quick searching glance at the table to see if there were signs of gambling, Austin went upstairs without a word. But so strong was his influence and disapproval that it killed all the interest, and the men all left.

Mr. Hill sat alone, after they had gone, with the same feeling he used to have when his father had caught him doing something mean. He rankled at the thought of this boy setting himself up as judge. He thought he ought to be the master of his own house. He did not reason that Austin had said nothing, that he was only battling with the boy's thoughts. That night he determined that Austin should learn to keep his place. It was preposterous, he thought, that he could not entertain his friends as he pleased.

Austin's feelings after he had reached his room were as serious and positive as his father's, but he took an entirely different view of the whole matter. The question with him was how he should put a stop to such carousing in the house. He wanted to bring up the children in right paths, and how could that be done if they had to be thrown into such influence? It would be a matter of only a short while till Harry would be old enough to begin enjoying these evil associates. So while his father was contemplating how he should show Austin his place, Austin was wondering how he should be able to get to his father's deceived heart something of what his duty was.

"You thought yourself pretty smart last night," he said to Austin the next morning in his surliest voice.

"I was not spying, but was only out to prayer-meeting and came in a little late," answered the boy.

"Looks like a man ought to have a right to entertain his friends in his own house without being ordered about by a boy," continued the man in a

growling manner.

"Nobody was ordering you about, so far as I know. I am sure I said nothing," Austin replied.

Now was his time, Austin thought, to explain himself. "I do think it is no example for you to set before the children to have such a crowd in," he said.

Here the conversation stopped for the time, but the feeling of antagonism only grew by the encounter.

Mr. Hill had promised to support the family; but Austin, when he had gotten everything to going smoothly, saw no reason why he should not work also, rather than stay at home all the time. With his help morning and evening it was not difficult for the girls, now fourteen and twelve years old, to do the work nicely.

This was a welcome decision to his father, and soon it was the old story, Austin working and giving all his wages to the support of the family, and his father helping only as was positively necessary.

It was not many weeks after Austin's return home (for changes came rapidly in this household) that the father had forsaken his job and was again wandering about, leaving the family on Austin. It was a serious outlook for the boy. No longer did he entertain the optimistic view of life that he had held in the beginning of his experiences. When he was fourteen, he felt as if he should be able to support the family like a man, now at sixteen he knew that he could never do that and keep them together in the home besides. It took too much of his time and ambition trying to train the children and direct their minds in the right channels. His father was drinking all he could obtain and that was liquor of a very bad kind. In all, the outlook was serious as the summer drew to a close. Just what the winter would bring for him and his charges he hardly knew.

He had followed the advice of Pastor Bennet and had sought out a congregation with whom he met in worship. He had passed by the richer, finer church, and sought to find among the more humble congregations one that would be spiritual. Also he wanted to go where he could hope to take the children and have them look presentable. He hardly hoped to be able to dress them for a wealthy place. Every week showed Austin more clearly the battle that must be waged, not of fists or of tongues, but of wills, in the home. The children were growing older, and they, too, had lost for the father that feeling of reverence and respect which is right. They had been more than a year away from Austin's influence and restraint, and while they out of sheer thankfulness yielded themselves to him when he returned, yet as the weeks went by Austin saw that he should have a very big undertaking on his hands just to hold them in control. Besides this was his father's antagonism. The men did not quarrel, but cutting and sneering remarks, indifference to his wishes, and a general atmosphere of hostility prevailed in his father's presence, while Austin stood against all this determined to hold his points and if possible keep the home clean. Gradually Austin's influence in the home prevailed, and because of this, no doubt, his father

was found more often away.

CHAPTER 16

SEEKING NEW PASTURE

When David roamed over the hills of Bethlehem feeding his father's sheep, he occasionally had to lead them into new pastures. He knew that sheep to thrive must feed on rich grasses and drink of living waters. When he sought out these feeding-places, he took into consideration the needs of the sheep, finding pasture where the young could feed as safely as those who were stronger.

God's people are compared to sheep and their pastors to shepherds, and the Word of God preached to them is compared to the good pastures. Austin found himself a lone sheep separated from his flock and away from his shepherd with the responsibility of seeking out his own pasture. But you may be certain that he asked the guidance and assistance of the Chief Shepherd.

"Seek out as soon as you can, Austin, a spiritual people and worship with them regularly," Pastor Bennet had said in his farewell counsel, and these words kept ringing in Austin's ears. To a boy of less timid nature this would not have been so great an undertaking, but to Austin it was a serious problem. In the first place his knowledge was limited. His religious experience had been bounded by life under the care of Pastor Bennet, and he did not realize the great difference between church and church. That some churches were richer than others he knew, and that some Christians were less humble than others he was also aware. He was certain that the people who attended the larger churches would dress too fine for him and his family, and he would feel neither welcome nor comfortable. He therefore must hope to find his pasture among the smaller and more humble congregations. Pastor Bennet had expressly advised that he find a spiritual people. Why were not all Christians spiritual? Were they not all serving the same God!

The first Sunday he went alone to seek out his place. There were two reasons for this, first that he could go in and out with less notice and also listen with less distraction, and the other reason was that the children were without suitable clothing to go with him. They wanted to go, but he put them off with a promise for the future. He had been making inquiry about a place to worship and had learned of an earnest, zealous people who worshiped in a small building on a side street. From what he had heard, he felt attracted to this place. It seemed to have a reputation for earnestness and spiritual advancement more than any other.

He entered among the other worshipers and took a seat well back, and watched to see how the service was conducted and to compare this congregation with the one he had left. The people came in quietly and seemed humble and sincere. He found himself entering into the spirit of the meeting. The Sunday-school was not large, but was interesting, and he thoroughly enjoyed it. When the minister rose to speak, he had a message

that cheered the hearts of his hearers. Austin sat attentively listening, his serious eyes dwelling on the face of the speaker. Pastor Gray was soon attracted to the earnest young listener, and when the service closed, hurried back to grasp his hand and speak to him. Others of the members also made him welcome with pleasant greetings and hearty invitations to return and worship with them again. Austin left the house cheered and comforted, with thankfulness in his heart that so soon he had found a feeding-place.

He told the children where he had been and that by the following Sunday he wanted to have them all ready to go with him and enroll in the Sunday-school. This was to be a new experience for the children, for they had been out of Sunday-school so long that the younger ones hardly knew what it would be like. All of them from Amy to Doyle were glad to make ready for the new experience.

The next Sunday morning was a busy one, but in due time Austin with his little flock about him walked down the dusty street to the place of worship. He was met at the door by the superintendent and made welcome, and the children were placed in their proper classes. When it came time for the study of the lesson, Austin took an active and interested part, which pleased his teacher very much and attracted the attention of the superintendent. They had been needing a teacher for the boys' class, and at once that worthy person thought she saw in Austin just what was needed.

"Brother Hill," she asked him after Sunday-school, "have you ever taught a Sunday-school class?"

"Yes, I had a class before I came here," he answered.

"We are needing a teacher for a class of boys. Would you be willing to take it?"

Immediately Austin thought of Pastor Bennet's instruction to his young converts, to take hold of any work that might be given them to do. Besides, he longed to be useful.

"I should be glad to do so," was his answer.

This class of boys was a real blessing to Austin all through the summer, and he found himself taking each one into his heart. He wanted to be able to lead them also to his Savior. Soon he began going out to the evening services and to the midweek prayer-meetings, and found himself one of the little flock working for the Master. It was with gladness that he was able to write back to Pastor Bennet that he had indeed found a real home. So the summer wore away. Austin was as busy and as happy as he had ever been in his life. To be with the children and to feel he was being a blessing to them brought gladness to him, and added to this was the association with the little congregation of spiritual people. His heart swelled with thanksgiving to God.

Every boy with ambition in his heart feels great longings to be useful in this world, to accomplish something. According to each boy's talents and inclinations these longings take different forms. One pictures himself a

successful business man, another rises high in some of the professions, yet another becomes in his dreams a man who understands the sciences, or who digs deep into the mysterious things of this world. Every real boy has his dreams, and Austin was not an exception. He would not always be with the children. In a few years they would be grown, and he would be free. Then, oh, then he would go forth to his achievements! But when he looked forward, there was a broad expanse of years. And already his wings began beating against the bars. He longed to be out, to be free.

Again he found that the things which boys like appealed to him. There were outings and sports he would have liked to take part in, but his home responsibilities hindered him. He wanted often to do things which under other circumstances would have been all right, but by the doing of which he would lose influence with the children. Often he would have to steel himself against those things his boyhood called for and be as one much older. This gave him a manner rather stern and grave, and made him unlike other boys. It shut him off from those of his own age, and to a great extent made him unable to fully sympathize with his sisters in their girlishness. It seemed to him they ought to be steady and serious like himself, and often he gave them sharp reproofs, which were hard for them to bear. In later years they saw that he had more to carry than nature had made a boy ready for; and he realized that often he had asked too much of them.

The days were full of perplexities for Austin. The children had been left to themselves and had worked out their own problems, each in his or her own way, and the result was that they had lowered in moral tone and were in many instances crafty and deceitful. Austin was left alone with them for long periods at a time, and to bring the obedience that was necessary for the governing of such a household he had often to use sternness and even to chastise some of the younger ones. He must teach them some of the principles of obedience.

"Austin," said his father one day, "I have a contract for putting up hay that will give work for all of us for six weeks or more. How would you like to load up the family and enough cooking-utensils for use in the camp and go out with us? Amy and Nell could do most of the cooking, and you could have wages just as I shall give Wilbur. We shall be in camp steady till the work is done."

Austin considered this proposition, and accepted his father's offer. It would be a change for all of them, and he had always been fond of outdoor life. If the contract was properly fulfilled, it would net a good sum of money for the family purse, which meant a great deal. All the children entered into the plans for their outing with enthusiasm. To live like Gipsies for a few weeks would be great sport they were certain.

CHAPTER 17

TO THE HAY-FIELDS

They were to go to the hay-fields about the first of October, and the work would keep them a full six weeks, during which time they wished to remain constantly in camp. They would go to the more distant part of the fields and work toward town. The grass was upon hilly ground, making the work somewhat tedious in places. As the country was only thinly settled, they would be the entire time away from all social life. The camp would be moved several times, each time being pitched nearer town.

It would be a full day's drive from home to the place for the first camp, with the wagons loaded as they would have to be, therefore all preparations for the start were made the day before. The bulky machinery needed for haying was loaded upon wagons, while the camping-outfit, bedding, clothing, and all things for family use were put upon a separate wagon, where the children were to ride also. Austin was to be the driver of this wagon, and from the first be given the oversight of the children. The party would consist of Mr. Hill, Wilbur, Ned Bailey (who had been hired to help on the job), Austin, and the children.

In gathering together the implements needed, some one had to make a trip across a small pasture-field from which the scrubby timber had not been cleared. Will had hitched a team of young mules to one of the wagons and gone on this errand. The mules were frisky fellows and enlivened this little journey by running away. Wilbur got them under control with little trouble, but it was noticed afterward that one of the wheels of the wagon had been injured by striking against a tree. Because his load would not be so heavy as the others, Austin was given this wagon.

The morning they were to start every one was up early and eager to be off; but as is always the case at such times, they found more to do than they had supposed, and it was nearly noon when they left the house. They stopped in town to get groceries and a few things needed for the work, and were off again. Only Mr. Hill knew where the hay-fields were located, and as the road led through a rough country, he took the lead, the others following, making a jolly little caravan.

They had not gone far on the way when all the joy of the trip was taken away for Austin. He saw a suspicious-looking brown bottle pass between Ned and Mr. Hill. Too well he knew what that meant, and how unreasonable and inconsistent his father would be when his brain should be fired by the bottle's contents. In only a little while the silly jokes and ribald laughter of the two men floated back to those in the last wagon. Austin looked on the children in pity and was sorry that he had consented to take them on such a journey. But all they could do now was to go ahead, fare as they might.

Henry Hill still had a conscience, and at every draft from the hottle it lashed him harder, but he mistook it for Austin's accusing thoughts. He felt the serious, reproving eyes of his son rest upon him every time he took a sup, and to avoid this unpleasant sensation he drove to one side, and when Austin came along by him, he ordered that he go to the lead.

He knew that dim as the road was and rough, Austin would have all he could manage with his driving and could give no time to what was going on behind

him. Austin protested against this arrangement, for he did not know the way nor the condition of the roads. There were a number of small streams to be crossed, none of which had bridges, and all of which had treacherous quicksand beds, and he hated to drive first with the children. But his father was already past reasoning with and motioned Austin on with an imperative flourish of his hand. After getting the directions as well as he could Austin drove ahead. Presently they came to one of the little streams, the banks of which were steep and sandy, but by paying strict attention to what he was doing, Austin got into the water and out again on the other side without accident. The other wagons were not so fortunate, for one of them tipped over and spilled the machinery into the stream. It took some time to get everything out and on the wagon again, and the combined strength of the men was needed to accomplish it. To cheer themselves on their way Mr. Hill and Ned took several more drinks from the brown bottle. Fortunately for Austin and the children Wilbur was not drinking at all.

They had not gone far when Austin allowed his wagon to strike against a stone. Unfortunately it was the injured wheel that received this jolt, and it gave way. Here was a worse predicament than the first accident had been, for the wagon could not go at all. They unloaded one of the other wagons and reloaded it with the things from the one Austin was driving. It took some time to do all this, especially since half the men were almost past helping; already it was late. Mr. Hill had now come to the disagreeable stage of drunkenness and was furiously angry at this delay, especially because it had been Austin who had occasioned it. He did not think it best to vent his anger upon his son, so took it out upon the team. Talking loudly and swearing profusely, he stepped up to one of the horses and gave it a smart kick. This blow was unexpected by the animal and entirely uncalled for, and was spitefully resented--no sooner had the blow fallen on the horse's side than it wheeled and kicked back viciously. The blow struck the man on the thigh, and he gave a loud yell of pain. The pain was as severe as if the leg had been instantly broken by the contact, and no doubt that is what Mr. Hill thought had happened.

The children, already excited over the accidents, were now thrown into great alarm at the scream of pain from their father, and began to cry with fright. But Austin felt a wave of gratitude to the fiery old horse for punishing the foolish man.

"Hush, children! he is not seriously hurt, and the pain will sober him so that he can tell us where to go," said Austin with a good deal of inward satisfaction. As matters then were he had gone as far as he could without further directions, and his father was past giving any sensible orders. It had begun to look as if they must camp on the prairie till the man could sober up.

The boys helped the wounded man into his wagon and made him as comfortable as they could with some pillows and a bed-quilt, and went on with their work. Austin's guess had been right, for by the time the boys were ready to start on, Mr. Hill was able to tell them where to go.

The accidents had hindered the little caravan so much that they did not reach their destination till long after dark. They were to camp that night

in the yard of the man for whom they were to work, and it was very late when they drove in and gave the customary call. Mr. Jenkins came to his door and in a few minutes was out in the yard with them. Will and Austin were out of their wagons and explaining how they had been delayed. Mr. Jenkins looked about in some perplexity.

"Where is Hill, the man I contracted the work to?" he asked. "Father is yonder in the wagon. He had an accident on the way and is not able to get out of the wagon by himself," explained Will.

Mr. Jenkins walked around to where Ned and Mr. Hill were nodding drunkenly, and turning to the boys he said, "Been drinking I guess." The boys said nothing, for both of them were heartily ashamed of their father's condition.

Mr. Jenkins, who had a kinder heart than tongue, said some very hard things that night to the stupid men, but helped the boys to get them off the wagons and into bed.

"If a man has no respect for himself, he ought to have some for his children. Think of your dad being out with his little girls on a trip like this and getting into such a condition," stormed their host. The boys made little reply, for nothing they could say could mend matters nor make them less mean. As for Henry Hill, he was past all feeling or consideration, being as stupid as if he were not a man at all. He hardly knew when he was placed in his bed.

There was little room in the ranch-house, and beds had to be piled upon the floors of some empty bins in the barn. Here the weary children were soon in sweet, forgetful sleep. When Austin lay down to rest, with his little sisters sleeping near by, he thought soberly and earnestly. His lot had been cast among the wicked, but by the grace of God he meant to make the best of it anyway, and do what he could for the little ones. It was hard to have as kind a feeling toward his father as a Christian should, but he was able to conquer himself and keep peace in his soul. Never will he forget the battle he fought that night with apprehensions, discouragements, and evil feelings toward his parent. Lying there in the dusty granary with the mice scampering about, he prayed, "O God, give me grace to feel toward Father as I should. Help me in the coming weeks to always do right. Show me how to protect the children, and forgive me for consenting to bring them on such a hazardous journey."

CHAPTER 18

SIX WEEKS OF HAYING

Morning came at last, bringing light and warmth, and the children were up and ready for the remainder of their journey. Mr. Hill and Ned were sober now, and luckily the bottle was empty. They were very cross and out of sorts from the effects of their drinking, but able to help with the work. Mr. Hill could limp about on his injured leg, and so they were soon off to

their first camp.

At last they drove to the place that Mr. Hill had previously chosen to set up camp, and soon the tent was up and the stove ready for the fire, and the few cooking-utensils in place. While part of the company were doing this, one man had already gone to the field, and the sound of the mower, as it cut the fragrant grasses, came in a merry tune to their ears.

Since the brown bottle that had caused them so much grief on their journey was empty, things went on very smoothly in camp. The girls did very well with the cooking, with Austin's ever-ready help when they were in perplexity. Everything took on a more hopeful air.

"I am not going to work today, Father," said Austin quietly the first Sunday morning.

"Not going to work! Are you sick? What is the matter with you?" gruffly answered his father.

"This is Sunday, the day set for worship, and I wish to have it for study and prayer even if I can not go to church."

"We have no time for sentiment here. This work must be done in the quickest time possible. We are all going to work today the same as any other day," said Mr. Hill decidedly.

"Do not count me in for today. I shall not work," said his son just as decidedly.

Henry Hill looked at his son in a puzzled manner. He wanted to force him to do as he had bidden him, but he remembered another time when Austin had said just as decidedly that he would not do as he had been told, and the consequence of trying to use force. So without a word he turned about and went on to his work.

Austin thought a principle was at stake in this. His father had no sympathy with his desire to serve God and would have been glad to hinder him from careful obedience. If he gave in to ignore what he thought to be the teaching of the Word and to ignore the dictates of his own conscience in working on Sunday while he was here in the hay-field, he could not hope to have freedom in service to God in other things. He remembered how his first pastor had warned him to be bold and fearless in his home in serving God and he would keep the victory. When Mr. Hill had gone out, Austin helped the girls get their morning work done and dinner planned, then with his Bible in hand he strolled off to the shade of a hay-stack and spent a profitable season in study and prayer. The days had been so full that he had had little opportunity for communion with God during the week, and this was very refreshing to his soul.

"I see where you have the best of us," said Ned at the dinner-hour, "for you get a day's rest, and we do not."

"My team and I can work all the better tomorrow for our rest today," said

Austin with conviction. "My father will lose nothing by my keeping Sunday. Man and beast need one day of rest out of the seven on a job like this."

Austin was to see many trying places where neither his father nor his brother would be any help to him in his service to God, and it is well for his future progress that he learned right at the first to stand by his convictions. But it is not more true in his case than in the case of every young Christian. Those who will stand faithful in the tests of life are the ones who gain the crown at last. While it is true that God has promised to keep his children in the most trying circumstances, it is also true that the child must put his trust wholly in God and live obediently. The Christian can go through any dark place and endure any hardness if he keeps a firm trust in God and, his purpose strong and true, but he will falter in the smallest trials if he is not firm.

The young Christian need not hope to be always surrounded by those who are in sympathy with his religious life, but each must learn to serve God in spite of circumstances and surroundings. And the service of God is not a thing to be hidden away. If a man is a Christian, he will show it out every day. It will make a difference in his whole life. There will in all that he does and says be an influence for God and good. This is especially true of the young man who is thrown among those who are sinful and rough. The difference in the tone of his life and theirs is a constant reproof to sin that will, as in the case of Austin and his father, bring embarrassment to the sinner.

The days moved by in quick succession, with very little variation in the order of the day's work. They rose early and worked late. Three meals a day were waiting for them in the tent, prepared by the faithful little cooks. Only on Sunday was there a variation in the routine, and on that day Austin refused to go to the field at all.

The hay had been finished around the first camp and they had moved back to another good center, only in a few days to move again. Now they had come to their last camp, which was but ten miles from town. Another week or ten days would let them out of their job and they could go home, but often the last week is the longest week when one is isolated. Austin longed to be back to his Sunday-school and to meet again with the congregation at the little chapel.

"Father," he asked on Saturday evening before the sixth Sunday out, "may I have a horse to ride to town tomorrow?"

"What do you want to go to town for? We are not especially needing anything," ungraciously replied his father.

"Tomorrow is Sunday and one team will be idle. I want to get back to my Sunday-school class and to meet with the people in church once more. I will not ride fast if you will let me have a horse."

"No, you can not have a horse. I have them out here for work, not to run about," snapped the man.

Austin said no more and went quietly back to his reading. Mr. Hill thought he had scored a victory and felt elated accordingly, but Austin was only waiting to consider what his duty might be. In the morning he rose before day and prepared himself for a journey. He took nothing to hinder his progress, but with his Bible under his arm he set out for town. If he had no bad luck, he could get a part of the Sunday-school and all the preaching service.

"Where is Austin?" asked his father at the breakfast-table, for his place was vacant.

"He started for town before we were up. He wants to get there in time for church," said Amy.

"Ten miles to church. That is a record and no mistake," laughed Ned. Wilbur and his father joined him in the merriment, but Mr. Hill felt a twinge of conscience. "I might have let him have a horse if he was so determined to go," he said.

"I wonder how Austin made it this morning. Wonder if he will be back for work tomorrow," remarked Wilbur at the dinner-table.

Austin was entirely unmindful of these remarks. He walked the full ten miles to town and arrived in time for about half the Sunday-school. He was too late to teach his boys, but promised to be with them the next Sunday. He went out to the house and rested during the afternoon and remained in town for the night service. He rose early the next morning and started back to his work, but this time he did not have to walk the whole way.

"Good morning, Parson, want a ride?" a cheery voice called. Austin looked up, a little abashed at being addressed as Parson, but glad for the offer.

"Thank you, sir, I should be glad to ride," he said, climbing in.

"I took you for a parson when I saw that book under your arm, but you look too young for the part," said the man looking at him curiously.

"No, I am not a preacher, but a hay-hand from Jenkin's ranch. I walked in to church yesterday, and am just getting back this morning."

"You are more serious about such things than some people I know, to walk that far to hear a sermon," laughed the man.

"Perhaps, but I find it worth being serious about," good-naturedly replied Austin.

The ride carried him within a short distance of his work, and he was ready to be in his place when the grass was dry enough to cut. He felt none the worse for his journey, and greatly refreshed in spirit for having met with the people of God.

Before the week was out they had finished the last acre of cutting, and topped the last stack. It was a thankful family of sunburned people who

retraced their steps to their home at the edge of town.

CHAPTER 19

INDECISION AND RESTLESSNESS

It was now the middle of November, and the children were not yet in school. Austin's first duty after coming back from the hay-fields was to get them ready and started in for the rest of the winter. He himself would have to work every day to help with the support of the family. No time now for him to think of going to school, but the younger five should have a better opportunity than he had been given. Such was his vow as he started them off the next Monday morning. The children were delighted to be back in Sunday-school and to begin their school-year. The time spent in the opens had greatly increased their appreciation of home.

But troubles were ahead. The warfare between Austin and his father waged harder than ever. They had no common point of contact in their natures. Austin had a clear, definite conception of duty and right, while his father's conception of such things was unusually dim and vague. Austin not only saw and understood his own duty, but he saw with equal clearness his father's duty. Though he was not a boy to nag, yet so strong was his personality that his displeasure was keenly felt. Thus Henry Hill felt continually under criticism. He was lashed for every slip and lapse from duty by the unspoken condemnation of this clear-eyed, strong-souled son of his, and made extremely uncomfortable.

Austin was almost as restless as his father. He had continually to fight a disgust and hatred that should have no part in a Christian's emotions. And he longed to be of service in the world. It was the call of youth in his veins that stirred these restless longings, but Austin had no one to explain this to him. It is not nature that a boy should settle down to carry a man's responsibilities, and any boy who has it to do will either become a drudge or will suffer with restless longings that can hardly be controlled.

"I am out of work again and do not know where in these parts I can get the kind I want. While you are here to stay with the children, I believe I will get out and look around a while. Maybe I can locate something more suitable in another town," said Henry Hill to his son one day.

It was the same old story. Restlessness, dissatisfaction, wanderlust, irresponsibility, shirking of duty. Austin's lips curled just a little in scorn before he answered his father.

"Better get you a steady job here and settle down and keep the children in school. Even if you can not get just what you might want, you can have plenty of good-paying work, and be at home. Something brought in every week for the support of the children is needed here more than anything else."

"I can not see my way clear to do that, Austin. While I am sticking with a

poor job here, the very kind I want might be getting away from me. The thing to do in a case like this is to get out and hustle and find what you want," reasoned the father.

"Well, as you will. But I shall need help to get on with the children. I can not do my duty by them and yet fully support them."

"Do not worry about that. I usually keep up my part of everything," said the father.

But he went away leaving practically nothing with Austin for the care of the children, and he was not seen in those parts again. Occasional letters came from him, and sometimes a little money accompanied these letters, but for the most part it was the labors of Austin's hands that kept the wolf from the door.

It was the beginning of winter, the season when household expenses are the highest, and it was a hard struggle for the boy to carry the whole load all the weary weeks. The care of the children also was great. The irresponsible nature of their father ruled in some of their natures, and to Austin it at times seemed there was no use trying to make good citizens of them. But he remembered his mother and how hard she would have struggled to keep them together, and what efforts she would have made to bring them up right, and for her sake he struggled on. He hoped for nothing from the older boys, for they paid little attention to him and the children.

"Is Hill about anywhere?" asked a rough voice at the door.

"No, sir, he is not at home. Is there anything I can do for you!" asked Austin politely.

"No, perhaps not. I wanted to see him. He justly owes me a sum of money, and as I am needing it now I wanted to see if he would come across with it," answered the man gruffly.

Austin had not known of any such debt and now inquired of his caller until he had the man's side of the story. Later he investigated the matter until he was satisfied that it was a just debt. His father had left in his care a few hogs, and their sale would pay the debt and leave a little over. Austin was confident that his father would never come back and had intended not to pay the debt at all. He did not want such a blot on the family name, so determined to sell the hogs and pay the debt.

This he did, writing his father of the transaction, and receiving in reply a scorching reproof for his forwardness. He could not hope to be in his father's good graces for a long time after this deed. "If he does not want straight dealing, he had better not leave his business in my hands," was Austin's mental comment as he read the letter. Austin was free also at this time in writing very pointedly to his father of the family needs and to insist that more money should be forthcoming to meet current expenses. He had none of those lofty feelings that had stirred his young breast when he worked in Mr. Long's garden. He felt that he was being imposed upon.

At last the father sent the word that he had located the good job and was now ready for the family. He told Austin to dispose of the household goods and bring the children as soon as he could. But there was nothing to cheer Austin in doing this. It meant only another few months in a strange locality and then on again somewhere else. The only way for his father to settle down at all seemed to be for him to have the full responsibility of the children where he could not get away. Austin determined to give him a new lesson.

He disposed of the household goods, packed the bedding and things to be taken to the new home, and, putting the children on the train, sent them to their father; and he staid on with his work, for he had a good place. The children were unwilling for this, but Austin's patience had worn out, and he felt he could not carry his father's burden any farther.

Henry Hill was quite chagrined at the turn Austin had taken. He did not suppose the boy would leave the children again. But there was nothing else to do but take his load and carry it. Those weeks of waiting during the winter had been fruitful in the hearts of his children in developing in them all a genuine disregard for their father. Austin had not the ability of his mother to lead the children away from him and his influence. He had been so vexed with his father's behavior that he had lent an influence of disrespect to the children. Now that they were under their father's government, they grew every week more unruly and disobedient to him. He had no control over them. Even his dull eyes saw the danger into which Amy and Nell were drifting in the careless, unrestrained way they were taking. So in his helplessness he could only turn to Austin. Writing him something of his difficulties, he said: "I shall have to give up housekeeping entirely if you can not come, for the girls will get into trouble. They need some one over them who can manage them. They will not obey me at all."

It had been a number of weeks since he had sent the children away, and in that time Austin had been far from happy. He felt that he was not doing his duty, yet he could not under existing circumstances feel that he should take the entire care and support of the children. But this S. O. S. aroused him to a knowledge of the present duty, and he went directly home.

The change which had taken place in the children in the weeks he had been absent amazed him. There had been something about their new environments that had developed the worst that was in them. They now lived in town, and the girls had been running about at their will. They had fallen in with companions who were not doing them any good, and at the present rate of speed would soon be past any control at all.

Austin took up the home cares as well as he could, though with a sinking heart. He was terribly alone and helpless. And again he was plucked up from his church-home, a sheep out on the barren mountains, it seemed to him. And in looking ahead he could see nothing bright to work toward. But he did not lose hold of the throne of God and did not forget to seek comfort and strength in prayer. And God helped him in those days.

He had been out from the house a short while one evening, and when he came in, his father said, "I wish you would go and find the girls."

"Why are they away? I did not know they intended going out," said Austin in some surprize.

"Well, they are gone and would tell me nothing about where they were going. They dressed in their best and set off down the street," answered the father in a worried tone.

Austin set out, praying as he went. He had no idea where he was to go nor how he should find them, for the town was large and just at that time was filled with visitors attending some sort of circus just at the edge of the town. Tonight large crowds were going out there, and for several nights the conduct in and about the tents had been boisterous. It was no place for two little girls to go unattended. Toward this place Austin made his way, praying earnestly. And down the street he saw Amy and Nell drifting with the crowd and having the best of times. Hurrying till he overtook them, he touched them on the arms gently and said, "I have come for you girls. It is time you were at home."

They looked at him in surprize for an instant, and while he met their eyes without flinching, he cried out to God from his heart. If they would not obey him he was helpless. But they obeyed without protest and went home with him. He questioned them a little and found that they had gone out without planning, just dressed up and gone out for what good times they could find. He explained to them something of the dangers of such a course, and they listened to him courteously.

This incident gave him both courage and uneasiness. Courage to hope that he might be able to govern them, but uneasiness about their sudden whims and turns. If he had been instructed of the changes in disposition that overtake all children at their age, he might not have been so troubled, but to him it seemed that his little sisters had suddenly determined to take the wrong course in spite of everything. He saw more plainly than ever that his father had trifled away his chance of influencing his children for good.

CHAPTER 20

MOTHER HILMAN'S OPINION

"Nettie," asked Mother Hilman in her even, placid tones, "what do you think of that young madcap Wilbur Hill?"

Mother Hilman sat at the kitchen window of her comfortable, country home busy with some household duty, while her daughter was preparing dinner. Mrs. Hilman was one of those fortunate souls whose spirit is like the calm, unruffled sea. She had a trust in God and a love for mankind that kept her heart continually at peace. And her question now was spoken in tones much more kind and benevolent than her words. Nettie already had gray hairs about her temples, so answered her mother's question without any maidenly embarrassment. "I think him more likable than reliable."

"I think so. I do like the boy, yet he is one to make a good mother worry. How he reverences his mother's memory! It seems too bad that she had to be taken from him right when a boy needs a mother the most. She must have been a good woman. I should like to meet the brother of Will's he spoke of the other day."

"Didn't Will say that his father and the younger children are living in town now?"

"Yes, I believe so. Let us ask him when we see him again about his family, and especially that brother. I believe he would tell us all we wish to know."

"Will," said Mother Hilman when again she had opportunity to speak to her neighbor's hired boy, "Nettie and I have been speaking about your family. Did we understand you to say that your father and the children are living in town now?"

"Yes, ma'am. The girls keep house for Father."

"And where is the brother of whom you spoke the other day?"

"Austin? Oh, he did not come with the rest, but remained at his old job. Father, you know, has not been here a great while, and the children came only a month ago."

"Who was with the children while your father was away?" asked Mrs. Hilman with keen interest.

"Austin. He is like a mother with them. Austin is a queer fellow, not like another boy I know in the world," and Will looked up with an expression that invited confidence.

"What makes him so different?"

"It is his religion mostly. He is just like an old person, does not care to go anywhere but to church and Sunday-school. He seems to enjoy staying at home with the children, and does so months at a time. I should die if I had to tie myself down as he does, yet he seems as cheerful as any one," said Will frankly.

"Perhaps your brother has been converted."

"Yes, that is the very word he uses," replied Will. "He tried to tell us all about it, but we could not see through it. He says he does not care for the things of the world, and he means by that that he cares nothing for any of the good times out with the boys. And he certainly acts as if he did not care, and prays and reads his Bible! Says grace at the table like a preacher. I admire his pluck."

"What church does he belong to?" asked Mother Hilman, her admiration increasing for the boy under discussion.

"That is another of his queer notions. He passed by all the fine churches and hunted up a little band of people who have a mission on a side street there, and worships with them because he says they are more spiritual."

"We have such a band of people here." "Have you? I will tell Austin when he comes, for he will not stay away from the children long. I think it is the mission that keeps him there for one thing. He hates to leave the people, and he has a Sunday-school class." "Do tell him to come. We shall be glad to have him with us."

"Mrs. Hilman, Austin is here already. I saw him over in town last night and told him about your meeting, and he said to tell you he would be there without fail next Sunday," said Will, when he saw her a few days later.

When the Hilmans went to church the next Sunday, they saw a strange young man in one of the rear benches. At once they recognized him as a brother of Wilbur Hill. As it was early, not yet time to begin the service, they went to him to make his acquaintance.

"Is this Austin Hill?" asked Mother Hilman in her kindest tones.

"Yes, that is my name," answered Austin.

"My name is Hilman. Your brother Will has been telling me about you," she continued in her friendly tones.

"Yes, he told me some of the stuff he has been telling you. It makes me feel foolish. But I am glad to meet you anyway," said Austin, blushing.

"You have your brother's confidence and that is a good recommendation for any Christian," said Mrs. Hilman, pleased with his humility.

"He said you were a believer in spiritual Christianity."

"Yes, I have been worshiping with a band of spiritual people, though I joined and still have my letter with the church where I was converted."

"Can you take dinner with us today? If you can, we might talk of some of these things," said the kind old lady.

"Thank you; I shall be glad to do so," said Austin, whose heart longed for just the kind, Christian counsel he believed this mother would give.

The past week had been a weary one for Austin. He had found it harder than ever to get along with his father. The conflict between them became more marked all the time. They did not quarrel, but the father let no opportunity pass to give Austin to understand his disapproval of and disdain for his religion, while Austin had to fight continually the feeling of disrespect and contempt for his father. The family was preparing to move to the country. This was welcome news to Austin, who found managing them in town more than he could do. He was almost discouraged with trying to teach the children right. His visit with the Hilman's was a great pleasure.

After the good Sunday dinner Mother Hilman sat down with her young guest in the front room, and they talked of those things that were nearest both their hearts.

"Austin, it affords me much pleasure to see you serving God in your youth. In giving God your service now you are giving him the best of your life, and missing much that is sinful in the world."

"I thank God," said Austin, "that I have learned to know him. I do not know what I should do if I did not have him to comfort me, for many things perplex me." "I gather from what your brother says of your home-life that your father is not a servant of God."

"No, my father has never been converted. I long to see him have a change of heart. His influence would be so much better with the children. But he seems to care nothing for the things of God, and it is a vexation to him that I am a Christian."

"I am sorry that it should be so in your family," said Mother Hilman, sympathetically, adding, "but of course you will stand true to God; for God makes all such things a help to his children if they will in faith look to him. Read your Bible much, Austin; and pray fervently, both for yourself and for your poor father. If you pray for your father with a loving heart, it will help you to bear more easily the conditions he causes in your home. And I am glad you find such joy in associating with spiritual people; many young men, and young women too for that matter, are led astray by wrong companionships."

"Mrs. Hilman," broke in Austin, "I enjoy the association of young people, and the friendship of godly young people is to me sweeter than any other earthly tie. But if the young people are not spiritual, then I find more pleasure in the company of older people who are spiritual, such as I find at the mission we attend. God is very near and dear to me, and so are his children; my only preference for the young people is because of my own youth."

Mother Hilman noticed the degree of wisdom Austin showed in his conversation. She found him willing to take advice from one older in the Christian way, too, which, as she was wont to say, "means much to new hearts under young heads."

Thus they talked of the deep personal experiences of grace and peace that are the Christian's birthright. The things that were said were an uplift to Austin; but it was the sweet influence of love and confidence which helped him most. His heart was sore with contention and strife, and a day in this peaceful home did him good like a medicine.

CHAPTER 21

LIKE THE TROUBLED SEA

Sometimes the waves of trouble roll over the soul like billows. There is no time for even a breath of quiet between the overflowing waves as they roll high over the soul. Austin had entered into such a season of tempest. He tried to reason out his duty, but could come to no satisfactory conclusion. He had promised God, the children, and his own soul that he would never desert the home again; but now he found himself facing the issue once more. So hard had come the battle between his father and himself that he was at a loss to know whether either duty or wisdom demanded of him to remain. Contention and strife were most distasteful to him. Yet it seemed that for him to maintain any degree of self-respect or to hold to any of his religious duties brought upon him such taunts from his father that the boy was at his wits' end. And his father's attitude snowed itself more and more in the children. Besides, he felt the call of youth in his nature, and he longed to get away from it all and fill his life with those things that his heart craved to do.

At last he decided that he was wasting his time trying to stay in the turmoil, and abruptly left his father's home. Going to town he obtained a boarding-place and settled down to work. This course again failed to bring the desired results; and he found himself as restless and unstrung as when he was at home. He was not happy, could not feel he was doing his duty, and carried about with him an atmosphere of despondency that gave his friends alarm. They sympathized with him in his difficulties, but none could help him. He was face to face with his opposing giant and must fight his battle through alone.

Over and over he studied the situation as he sat alone in his hired room in the evening. The children needed him, he had promised to stay with them, he desired to do them good, he did not want to forsake his post, to be a deserter; but against all this was his father's opposition. Ought he to force himself upon his father? When he was made to feel so unwelcome and detested, should he still remain? After all, the children were his father's, not his. At last he decided to remain away until he should again, as twice before, be called home.

Now was the time for his youth to assert itself, for if he could not keep the children, why should he not prepare himself for the place in life he most wanted to fill? He wanted to be of service in the Master's vineyard. There was never a youth with a call to the sea or the plains who longed to follow the bent of his own heart more than did Austin. So we find him a few weeks later safely enrolled in a small school where he might prepare himself for the work of his choice. He knew how bitter his father would be about this, but he did not care. He was now in entirely new environments. Instead of opposition and contradiction, he found himself surrounded with people who were eager to help him on in his service to God. He was under the care of a man who recognized both the ability and the faithfulness of the boy and never lost an opportunity to encourage him. But in spite of all this the billows of trouble rolled high above him. In the midst of the kindness shown him he seemed to see the faces of his little brothers and sisters in their unfavorable surroundings. He felt like a renegade from duty, and something very like remorse beat hard against his heart.

Unable to endure the agony of spirit, he obtained permission to visit his

home and find out how everything was. He found the children already partly dispersed and the father seeking places for the others. When the children knew he was again at home, they came back immediately, and their home-life was once more set up. Everything went quite smoothly for a few weeks, then the old antagonism began to assert itself and Austin found it impossible to live peaceably with his father. When there was much friction between the two, it was hard to control the children, and soon he was meeting his old obstacles. His victory had not yet come. He remained with the children two months at this time; but finding it as unpleasant as ever, he again returned to the school. As soon as he was gone the children were again scattered about and the home broken. They would write him long letters, begging him to do something for them; but he did not know what to do, for he could not support them and take the oversight of the home in every other way also.

In weeks of uncertainty the time went by, eking out to the harrowed, homesick boy but a mere existence. What would in other circumstances have been a pleasure every day was now a torture to him. When he would study, he saw the faces of the children between him and his book. When he went to prayer, they alone stood before him, and when in the course of his work he tried to visit with those who might need his help, he saw only the children's outstretched hands before him. The soul can not stand such torture always, so finally Austin gave up trying to study and went out and found a job of work, determined to get a neat sum together and, when he had enough to be of some assistance, go to the children and help them.

It was the evening of only his first day's work that he returned to his room to find a letter from Nell.

"Dear Austin: Come home just as soon as you can. Papa is making arrangements to have strangers adopt the little ones, and we can never have them again. I can not stand it, and I know you will not want it. Amy and I are so tired of living away from home. We want a home again and we want all the children in it. It would never be home without our Doyle and Lila. You will do something, will you not? You will not forsake us now? Come, please come quickly.

"Your little sister,

"Nell."

Austin stood trembling with the letter in his hand, and he could almost see blood before his eyes, so great was his agitation. The thought of giving up the two precious little ones forever into the hands of strangers almost made him wild. Before the morning sun arose, he was on his way home. He could hardly wait to get there, though it was to find the home broken and the children scattered. Nell, who had been suffering almost as keenly as Austin about the little brother and sister, was almost overjoyed at his arrival, and took heart again. The protest that the two of them put up against their father's arrangements forever put an end to his plans. In another day that danger was past. But Henry Hill was not ready to settle down, and he had no idea of undertaking housekeeping again. He was just at this time in a merry mood about going to another part of the State to work

during the autumn months, as the farmers of that region were calling for help. He asked Austin to accompany him, and promised that if he found a suitable location he would again get a home for them. Under existing circumstances this seemed the only thing to do, so after finding places for Nell and Harry, they set out upon their new expedition with Amy and Doyle. Lila was left with a kind friend who would look after her.

When they arrived in the town for which they were bound, each of them found places to work, Doyle remaining in the family where his father was working. But conditions were not what they should have been for any of the children, and to Austin the whole arrangement seemed like a horrid dream. In a few weeks Nell came to them, and a place was found for her with another household. Poor little scattered orphans, how dark their way looked before them at this time! When Austin is gray-headed, he will yet remember with a pang his feelings during those weeks. His father made no effort to get them a home, and Austin knew not what to do. He saw that he would have to do one of two things: either take the whole responsibility of the children, or keep his hands off and let their father dispose of them as he saw fit. Neither he nor they could any longer stand this uncertainty.

At last his decision was made. He would swing loose from his father entirely and take the children himself. He believed that if he could get the cooperation of the girls in just the right way, it would be possible for them to get along. He did not doubt his ability to support them if they could keep up the housework. But he would have to depend upon them for that and he would go out and do a man's part. It would then be, not the children, but their father, who must look out for himself, for this new home was not to be his in any sense of the word. When he had decided to undertake this responsibility, he went first to his father. "Father, something has to be done for the children. I believe I can support them myself. Will you be willing to release to me all right to the children if I will take them and make them a home asking nothing of you? I want to get them together once more."

"You will find it quite an undertaking, but if you want to try it, I have no objection, and will not hinder you," was the answer.

The next step would be getting the cooperation of the girls. Without their willing assistance he could do nothing, and it would mean much for them to take the responsibility of home-keeping entirely upon themselves. Fortunately for Austin, he had learned how to carry all these burdens to One who was stronger than he, and to rely on his God to go before him and prepare the way.

CHAPTER 22

PLANNING FOR THEMSELVES

The girls, as well as Austin, were busy during the week, but they had Sunday afternoon to themselves. They were in the habit of spending this time together, and it was with both hope and fear in his heart that Austin

went the next Sunday afternoon after his talk with his father about the children, to see his sisters. Amy had come over to see Nell and the two were waiting for Austin, eager for the opportunity of pouring into his sympathetic ears their story of heartaches and struggles of the week past. They were both on the porch of the farmhouse to meet him, and as they were alone this big quiet porch was a suitable place for their talk.

Austin had not been with them long before he began the subject that lay closest to his heart. He had grave doubts of Amy's willingness to undertake housekeeping; for she had had experience enough to know that she thoroughly detested housework. But if Nell would put her little shoulder to the wheel he would be satisfied. They sat together in earnest conversation as they reviewed the whole situation. Austin was only eighteen but seemed fully twenty-five years of age. Amy was a pretty, slender girl of sixteen, full of life and spirit, but gay and thoughtless. Little Nell was only fourteen, and slight for her years, but with a quickness and decision that added to her attraction.

"Girls, it is our only hope," Austin said. "I do not believe Papa intends to do one thing. He will let things drift along and in time we shall lose Lila and Doyle entirely. We ought to have a home where the children can have a chance. But see how things have gone for years. When I stayed at home Papa opposed me and made it hard for us all, and when I left home he scattered the children."

"If we are to have a home we must stay by it all the time. I can not do it alone, but if you girls will stand back of me and take the responsibility of the housework, I believe I can support the family."

"I have talked the matter over with Papa, and he is willing that we should try this plan out, and has even promised to help us when he can. We might as well look at things as they are. None of us could be care-free like other young people, but instead we should have to settle down and keep things going. There are many things that we could not do, lest our good be evil spoken of. We would not dare to act in any way that would bring reproach upon us. It will be a serious undertaking, and I want you to be sure that you wish to do it. I am willing to do my part if you girls will help me."

The girls listened soberly, and when he had ceased speaking, they both waited in silence. At last Amy looked up with a mischievous smile, seeking to throw off the serious mood into which Austin's speech had put them. She was always afraid of a really serious mood.

"It is no fun keeping house. I do not know whether I want to attack a job like that till the children are grown up or not. You will have to give me time to study about it," she replied.

"How can we bear to have Lila and Doyle knocked about as they are now and have been?" asked Austin with reproach in his voice.

Nell looked up an instant and saw the look of pain in her brother's face which Amy's words had brought, and said quietly, "I will do my part the

best I can, Austin."

There are times when words are insufficient to express one's feelings. Austin found himself at one of these places. His heart had been almost broken with sorrow for the shattered home circle, and the deepest desire of his heart was to gather the children together again and if possible build for them a home where they could have a chance for home influences and comforts. That he could not do this without cheerful cooperation from his sisters he knew. So Nell's simple little answer sent a thrill of joy and hope too sweet for words to the very depths of his heart. This promise from her was all that he asked. He knew that she would stand by her vow. Years afterward when telling a friend of this incident, Austin said it was one of the sweetest moments of his life when he looked into the face of his sister and heard her tender promise. The two of them, for Amy was strangely left out now, talked the rest of the afternoon making plans for their future, hope springing higher every moment. But they were not undertaking something new, for well each of them knew what they were doing. They knew that it meant years of toil, care, and responsibility; but for the sake of home and the little brothers and sister, they were willing to do their part. At last the evening shades came creeping over the fields and they must part. Bidding Nell a loving farewell, Austin and Amy walked across the grassy meadow to the farmhouse that was Amy's temporary home, and leaving her there he hastened back to his place with a lighter heart and step than had been his for months. As yet they were but hired servants; but soon, soon they would have a home of their own. "Nell," he had said on parting with her, "I know you will do your part, and with Amy's help--for she will help, we know--we shall get along very well." Nell and Amy slept that night with a sense of coming happiness and hope that they had not felt for a long time. Though they lacked the strength of character that was Austin's heritage from his mother, they were home-loving as well as he. The main question with them was, "Where?"--what place would be best for them to begin all over again? The girls favored going back to the old home town; but Austin doubted the wisdom of this, for the girls had associates there who would do them no good. He craved new and better environments for them. Besides, he had suffered so much anxiety and disappointment there that he felt it could never be home to him. He favored a new town where there would be no influence nor prejudice against them, where they could make a new start entirely. At last he brought the girls to see the reasonableness of his view; but no definite plans could be made just yet. "Please do not stop in this part of the country, for I am so discouraged with everything that I do not know what to do," pleaded Amy.

"I know just how you feel, Sister, and I will not settle here. There is nothing here for us anyway. We must find a town where I can get paying work so that I can keep the bread and butter coming," he answered. "I have been thinking of Weston. The Baileys live there, and we have promised to go to see them some time. That is a thriving town, and perhaps I could get work. Besides, it is not far away and would not cost us so much in moving there. What do you say to my writing to Mr. Bailey inviting ourselves to visit them for a few days soon, and while there see what we can do?" was Austin's proposition to the girls one day.

"That sounds pretty good. At least we shall have a good time visiting with

the girls," they answered with spirit.

"Here is a letter from Austin Hill," said Mr. Bailey a few days later. "He wishes to find a location here and asks to bring Amy and Nell with him for a little visit while he is prospecting. It will be convenient to have them, will it not?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly. I shall be glad to get in touch with Austin again. I have often wondered lately how he is solving his many problems. How soon will they be coming?" was the answer of cheerful, mother-hearted Mrs. Bailey. Austin was wise in seeking to place the girls where they might have her good counsel.

It was not a week later when Austin and the girls arrived in Weston, and before three days had gone by Austin had obtained a position that would bring him a good livelihood. He was certain that God had favored him in obtaining such a place, and did not want to look any farther. The girls were not so favorably impressed with the surroundings, but were for looking elsewhere. They, poor homesick children, longed still for the old home town. Austin was firm, nevertheless, in his decision to stay by what he had found. "We have friends here who make us welcome. We need not feel that we are utterly strangers. I have a good job and it would be foolishness for me to look farther. Let us not quibble any more. If we are going to make a home for the children, let us get at it," he said in ending the contention. "If you girls wish to go on down home, or anywhere else, visiting, do it now before we start in. I want you to be satisfied, but I can not give up my position."

"No, we will not go anywhere now. If this is to be our home, we will get it started as soon as possible," was the answer of the girls.

It was at this juncture that they realized how little they had to go to housekeeping on. A house was out of the question. One month's rent in advance was more than they could spare and yet have enough to get a little furniture to put in it. The best they could do was to rent two empty rooms, furnish them with such things as they could buy at a second-hand store, and then get along on what was left till first pay-day.

The rooms were not in every way desirable, and it was with misgivings that the girls went with Austin to buy the furniture. They were beauty-loving girls, and their dreams of a new home had been rosy. It was hard to begin housekeeping with the things they would have to get. But when they considered that all they had to go on was the little that Austin had saved while he had been working on the farm, they knew he was doing his best. When the things were bought, Austin ordered them hauled to the rooms already engaged, and when the man went away, the three young people looked at their few possessions in their little home-to-be with varying emotions. Austin was hopeful. He could look away from that which was drab to the brighter side. Just to have the children together with a chance to give them. Christian training was all he could ask. He was willing to live in the plainest circumstances.

Amy looked on the homely pile of second-rate goods and made some light,

frivolous remark about their beautiful home. She was ready to laugh off in such a manner all her serious thoughts. Nell said nothing. She was a girl of fourteen, with all of a girl's love of beautiful things. She wanted a pretty home, with dainty furnishings and bright colors. Ever since she had promised to be Austin's housekeeper she had been building air-castles of the house they would have, and the home she would make. But she had not counted on such a beginning as this. She was too disheartened to think or speak. She passed by the pile of household stuff and her brother and sister, into the other room, and shut the door with a bang. She would have to have time to locate herself before she could be cheerful. Just now her heart was too full of dismay.

Austin and Amy went to work and put things in order so that they could cook supper and all lay their weary bodies down to rest. They were young, and soon their trials were forgotten in a sweet, refreshing sleep. Nell had regained her composure enough to help them the next morning, though she was yet very quiet when Austin went off to his work.

When Austin came home that evening, he found his sunny Nell of old at work in the rooms. She was improvising a curtain of some kind, and as he came in she was standing off to study the effect. She had managed to make the room look pretty. Amy acknowledged that she herself had thought the case hopeless all the time, and had made up her mind not to expect any beauty, but that Nell had transformed things. "Nell, you are a treasure. I am surprized that you could bring such order and beauty out of the chaos I left this morning," said Austin in his heartiest tones. And the words of cheer and praise brought a happy shine to the little girl's eyes, while her heart beat in happy contentment.

The three of them were soon living in peace and contentment in their own little home, making ready as fast as they could for the coming of the others. It was necessary that Austin get a better start with his wages before the family increase very much.

They talked and planned for the future. This was not to be at all permanent; just as soon as one month's wages were in hand a house should be rented, and they would furnish it as they could. As soon as they had enough together to care for the children, Lila and Doyle should be brought to them. And until the time when they could afford better, they all covenanted together to live as economically as possible. And as soon as the house was in proper condition for living, the two girls started to school.

CHAPTER 23

AUSTIN AND AMY

"How would my birds like to find a new nest?" asked Austin one morning not long after he had received his first month's pay. "We shall be only too glad to get out of this little place into a whole house," answered both the girls at once. "May we hunt one to suit ourselves?"

"You may, only remembering that we dare not go very high in rent, for the house has to be furnished also, and we have our winter clothes to buy," cautioned Austin. A house was found on a shady street, and was engaged at once. Before the week was out they were safely settled in their new quarters, and with a few more articles of furniture than had been possible at first. Mrs. Bailey had given them a few things to add to the homelikeness of their living-rooms, and they were quite comfortably settled, and getting along as happily as could be asked for. "I am going to quit school and get me a job," announced Amy with decision one morning before cold weather had set in. "Winter is coming and I have nothing decent to wear. I am ashamed to go out, and I am tired of the sneers of the girls at school."

"No, Amy, do not do that. I will give you money for clothes just as soon as I can. You need the schooling more than you can need clothes. Be brave and do not give up," urged Austin.

"I have made up my mind, so you need not try to turn me. I shall not go another day," she said. "Amy, it was my motive in getting our home started again, to get all of you children into school. Your clothes are as good as many of your schoolmates', and I can not give my consent to your leaving school now. So put it out of your mind." Austin said this in a paternal way particularly provoking to the spirit of the girl.

"Who was asking your consent? I am sure I had no intention of doing so. I simply announced that I was going to work, and that is what I intend to do," she answered hotly.

"Amy, you heard what I said! You can not quit school. I forbid it."

Amy's eyes blazed fire, and her slender shoulders shook with rage. "Austin Hill, you are not my father that you may order me about! Two years do not give you such authority over me. I am not going to school, and you might as well understand it!"

Austin's lips set in two straight lines that meant battle. If the children were not going to yield obedience to him, he would not be able to keep the home together. Amy ought to see this. He said no more, and left the house without a word of good-by.

Amy, angry and rebellious, did not prepare for school nor did she do her share of the morning work. Nell left the house for school all fretted and angry that Amy had shirked her part. So all three of them were thoroughly unhappy all the day long.

Austin's lips were still in their straight lines when he came home, and Amy just as defiant. He ignored her the entire evening, though he spoke pleasantly to Nell, and helped her with the work. Amy was unhappy and miserable, and the next day ungraciously enough prepared and went to school. But the battle was not done.

"I have a letter from Papa saying he will be here with the children this week. We must have everything ready for them," announced Austin a few days

after his conflict with Amy. And when the day came all three of them were at the station to welcome them. Lila and Doyle were wild with delight to be again with their brother and sisters, and wound their little arms about their necks in the most affectionate manner. Henry Hill looked on with complacency, for he felt that he was bestowing quite a favor upon his children in giving them such pleasure.

The children were well pleased with their new home, seeming not to notice the bareness of it; but their father noted it all, and said to himself, "Austin has undertaken more than he can handle. I thought he would find out there is something to supporting a family." But he did not divide his summer's wages.

"Girls, I have had a rise," said Austin one evening, and sat back to enjoy the expressions of pleasure from his sisters.

"But there is another side to it. I will have to work nights. I shall have long hours and be away every night but one each week. How will that suit you?" he added.

"We shall not be afraid," said Amy and Nell together.

"But I shall not be here to take you out of evenings. It will not do for you girls to be running about alone, and I fear the time will hang heavy on your hands."

"We shall get along all right. You need not worry about us," said Amy with more cheerfulness than was really necessary.

The new arrangement had not been in force long till reports came, in one way and another, to Austin's ears. There were fragments of conversations that floated into his bedchamber as he was trying to coax sleep to his weary eyes when the children were all home, bits of information that made him fearful that Amy was taking advantage of his absence at night to follow out her own plans.

"Amy, where were you last night?" he asked one day after he was certain he had some facts.

"Minding my own affairs," was the lofty reply.

"Were you out with Herb Wilson?" he asked again.

"I was out a while in the evening, if you must know, and Herb was in the crowd," she answered insolently.

"Do you not know that he and his crowd are not the kind of people you should be with?" he asked severely.

"Are you their judge that you can so sneeringly speak of them?" she asked as the angry blood rushed to her face.

"I am not sneering at them, but I do wish to protect the good name of my

sister, and I will have to forbid your going out with them again," he said decidedly.

"There you go, ordering me around like a little child. You expect me to obey you like Lila does. I will not, and I shall go out with whom and when I please," was her defiant reply.

Austin's lips again formed the straight line that meant battle. Amy felt a shudder of apprehension go through her being; but the same fighting blood was in her. She thought that he was encroaching on her rights, and she was set not to submit. He saw the danger she was in, and, besides that, the baleful influence she would have over the younger children if she so set his authority aside, and he felt that his home was again in jeopardy. So far as he was concerned, there would be no giving in.

"I am going to get me a job, and take care of myself," she flung at him as she read the decision in his eyes. "I will not be kept under in the way you want to keep me. I am almost as old as you, and able to judge who is fit company for me."

"No, Amy, you are far from able to choose your own company properly. You need some one over you all the time. You must listen to me. You will bring reproach on yourself and on us. You are not doing well in school, and I will not forbid your getting work; but if you stay at home you must be under the same rules as the rest. I can not have you running around nights in evil company. In this I shall not yield. You must obey me."

"I will not stay with you if I have to be bossed around," she said with all the spirit she could master.

"Very well. Nell can keep the house going, with Lila's help. If you can find a suitable place to stay, and wish to take the responsibility upon yourself, I shall not hinder you, but I can not have you here disobeying the rules I must make for the good of the family," he said firmly.

Amy had meant what she said, and Austin was just as far from speaking jestingly. So Amy found work that took her out of the home for a while. But her freedom was not all happiness, and she found hardships that were just as trying as Austin's attitude at home.

There was a meeting in progress in a neighboring town, and there Austin had gone for a day or two. The services had been very refreshing to him, and he longed for his sisters to come under the sweet influence of the people attending. So it was with pleasure that he carried to the girls a hearty invitation to come down and spend the last two days of the assembly. They accepted, glad for the change, and for the opportunity of visiting friends there.

The preaching was convincing, and the Spirit of God was there to talk to the hearts of sinners. Amy and Nell both felt His wooing presence with them, and yielded to the importunity of the good people about them, and took on themselves vows of loyalty and love to God. They were young, but really meant to be true, and came home to Austin with the happy news.

The joy of his heart was almost unbounded. That they would not be like himself, true to God from the beginning of their service, never occurred to him. He felt that his hardest trials were over, and that their home-life would not be any more darkened by contention. It seemed so good to have Amy back with them, and to him their taking part in the family worship seemed very precious.

"Amy," said Austin one day, "where were you last night?" "What difference does it make where I was?" she answered evasively. "That is not an answer to my question. I want to know with whom you spent the evening, and where you were."

"I went out a while with friends, and did nothing that I need to be called to account for. You are always forgetting that I am not a child, to be dictated to. I suppose some one has been running to you with tales," and Amy's face showed all of its old-time defiance.

"Not exactly, Amy," he answered. "I heard a bit of conversation between a couple of your acquaintances that made me doubtful, and then some of the conversation between Nell and you has floated in to me. I wish to know if you disobeyed and went out again in forbidden company. Is it true, Amy?" and the pain in his voice should have touched her heart. To him it was the keenest disappointment that she should fail, not him alone, but her vows to God.

"Yes, if you must know, I went out with the crowd you are determined to hate. And I will not have you talking against my friends."

"But, Amy, what about your influence as a young Christian? Besides, will their association build up a good reputation for you?"

"I suppose I shall have to leave home to have any liberty. I simply will not be dictated to. Austin, you are too overbearing for anything, and I can not stand it," and angry tears were close. "Amy, I have not relented in my decision that if I make a home for you children you must live orderly, quiet lives. It is useless for me to work and labor for a home, and have it spoiled by evil associates. If you live with us you must abide by the rules." That look that meant, without wavering, he would have his way, was in his eyes; and while the girl would not relent her decision to choose her own associates, she knew he meant exactly what he said. "You will get on very well without me. Nell is your housekeeper anyway. She wants to boss everything in the house. I can easily make my own way, and have a good time besides." "Amy, this is your home. You are as welcome as any of the children. I shall require nothing of you that I would not of Nell. But I must have it understood that you will have to recognize the rules of the home. I do not want you to feel that I am driving you from home, but that I am only giving you a reasonable choice."

"It is not much of a home you offer. Work hard all the time and never go anywhere. You expect me to be as old-acting and old-feeling as you are. You never were a boy. I am going to have my good times, and neither you nor anybody else shall hinder me!"

Austin contended no more, but left her with that set look on his face that meant war to the end. Too many years he had contended with contrary elements in the home to now know how to yield a point to what he believed would be wrong. His integrity of life had depended on his steadfastness, and in that he would stand.

Most of the time from this on the home consisted of only the four; for Amy, according to her vow, was seeking her own way.

CHAPTER 24

A SHOPPING-EXPEDITION

A year had passed since Austin had begun work in Weston and the three of them had set up housekeeping, and he was to have his first vacation. There had been many changes since that year began, mostly for the better. The cottage was now quite comfortably and prettily furnished throughout. To accomplish this had meant much hard work and little recreation for both Austin and Nell. Amy had never entered into the home-making with the ardor of her younger sister, and much of the time of late had been away. Lila and Doyle had now been with them a number of months, and had thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated home comforts and pleasures. Nell had been Austin's comfort and delight all these months. Harry had not yet come to them. He had the same traits of self-reliance and determination that had characterized Austin, and had found himself, though so young, plenty able to support himself, and he preferred to do it rather than to depend upon Austin. But only too well Austin knew the small chance his little brother would have for education in this way, and he longed to have him at home and in school while he was of school age. But recently had come a letter from the little fellow saying that he thought he would soon come to them, which message had sent a thrill of delight around the little circle. They longed to have it complete.

In planning his vacation, Austin had in his thoughts turned to the associations that had been so very pleasant in those months he had been permitted to spend in school. Here also was a man who had been more than a mere friend to him, and who would be able, he believed, to give him the counsel and advice he felt he needed just now with the care of his family. A visit in the home of this friend would indeed be enjoyable, and he might also meet with some others who had made those months bright. And what was perhaps a greater factor in his choice at this time was that the distance was not so great but what he could take with him his sister Nell. She needed the rest and change as much as he. He turned the plan over in his mind for some time, and when he thought he could see his way clear for such an undertaking, he mentioned his scheme to Nell.

"Oh, Austin, I should be delighted to go, but I should need new clothes for such a trip, and are you certain we can afford them!" exclaimed his little housekeeper.

"I have thought of all that, Nell, and I am sure we can manage," replied Austin happily.

"But, Austin, just my clothes is not all the problem. The children are going to need many new things this winter. Lila has outgrown or worn out nearly all her clothes, and Doyle is almost as badly in need. And I need a number of new things about the house. But perhaps we could get them cheaper while we are there in the city," said the thoughtful little girl.

"I had been thinking some about that; but I do not see how I can spare scarcely a thing for them now. We can, perhaps, get them a little at a time here as we must have them, but just at present I can not raise the amount it would take," answered Austin.

"Austin," said Nell one day, "maybe Papa would give us enough for me to do that shopping. He has not helped us a bit and he has had work all the time. Let us count up just what we might need, and, when he comes next week, let us ask him for the money. It is only right that he should help you with the care of the children, and I want to get the things right away."

"Well, you make a list of all the things you want to get and we will calculate the cost of them, and I will see what I can do with Papa. He promised to help us, and perhaps he will do so now," said the boy patiently. He hated to ask his father for the money, but he hated worse to see his sister deprived of this pleasure.

When the bill was made and culled to what they thought would not be inconsistent to expect of their father, fifty dollars was the amount they were going to ask of him. The thought of this sum in hand for shopping-purposes made the heart of the little girl buoyant, and she set about preparing for her journey with a very happy heart. It is certainly strange the music the contemplating of new clothes puts into the heart of a girl!

Mr. Hill came at the time expected, and was in the best of humor and seemed delighted to find his children doing so well. Nell took advantage of his good grace to explain about her trip to the city and the things she wanted to get. She showed him what was needed in the house to add to its comfort and beauty, and enlarged upon the scantiness of wardrobe for Lila and Doyle. And apparently he fell into her net without a misgiving.

"That will be fine, Nellie, and I will see that you have plenty of money to get what you need. I hardly suppose that Austin can afford to get all those things at once. It is fortunate that I came home just at this time."

"Thank you, Papa. We shall appreciate it much if you will help, for Austin has had so much expense in getting everything started that he can not let me have much just now. I think it will be just grand to buy them in the city." Nell's eyes shone with happiness as she spoke, and her hopes rose even higher so that she dared to hope for some of the pretty things her beauty-loving heart desired. She hurried about getting the house in shape and her wardrobe ready with as high hopes as ever a girl had. But the days passed one by one and her father did not give her the money. She began to

have misgivings, and went to Austin about it.

"Austin, why does he not give me the money! Do you suppose he means to go back on his word? Has he said anything to you about it?"

"I have not mentioned the matter to him. He promised you so fairly that I thought best not to say anything. He will surely give it to you pretty soon," said Austin comfortingly, though with many doubts in his own mind as to his father's intentions.

The morning of the last day before they were to start came and yet not one penny had been given them, nor did their father make any more mention of the matter. Austin promised Nell he would talk to him about it that evening, thus giving him all the time possible.

When Austin came home that evening it was to face the angriest girl he had ever seen. She was fairly bursting with indignation. Her black eyes snapped and her face was red with suppressed emotion.

"Austin, Austin, what do you think! Oh, it is too awful that he would be so mean! Papa gave me a little, old, ten-dollar bill! Think of it, after all my plans, and he knows how much I need. I told him at the first it would take all of fifty to get the things we really need. And he gave this as though he was doing me a great favor," and the girl, unable longer to suppress her emotions, burst into a torrent of sobs, and tears.

Austin stood without saying a word, looking at her. He felt stunned. Though he had long ago lost faith in his father, yet he had not thought he would be so contemptible as this showed him to be. His pity as well as his love for the child before him was unbounded, and he sought with all the tender words he could think of to comfort her. He promised to add a little to the ten so that she might get a few of the things she had hoped for, but he knew it was not much that he could do.

"No, Austin, I might as well give up the trip. With the little dab I would have I could do nothing. Oh, I wanted to throw it in his face!" and a fresh burst of sobs drowned her voice.

"Nell, you will not disappoint me like that. I have counted so much on your company. Please say that you will go anyway, and I will go to Papa and see if I can get him to do better," pleaded Austin. "Well, but he will not do any more. I know he will not," she said. With a hasty look upward to the One who can give grace to calm the turbulent soul, Austin went to confer with his father. He set the matter before him in all its pathos.

"Nell has worked hard, and been such a faithful housekeeper. She is not wanting to buy extravagantly, and she ought to have all that she has asked. I can't do any more, and I can hardly bear to see her so disappointed. Can you not do better by her now?" he had pleaded, humbling his own spirit in the asking, for he would rather have gone hungry and cold than to have asked his father for a cent. But his plea only succeeded in making his parent angry.

"You are both as ungrateful as you can be. The idea of a girl not being satisfied with ten dollars to go off on a shopping-tour. She needs to come down a bit. And if this is the way you appreciate what I do for you, I shall pull out of here and leave you to yourselves. Do not think I shall give another penny for any such a purpose."

And, suiting his action to his word, Henry Hill began making himself ready for his departure from the roof of his ungrateful children.

Austin went back to Nell to tell her that he had been successful only in making his father angry.

"Let him be angry, and let him go. I do not care," she said spitefully.

"Nellie, let us make the best of it and go on our trip," coaxed Austin.

"I will do it for your sake, but all the fun of it is spoiled for me," said Nell with a sigh.

"Maybe not, sister. I believe you will enjoy yourself well with my friends there, and we shall have enough money to take us sightseeing all over the city. I will give you the very best time I can, and we shall do our shopping as we have opportunity during the winter."

So Nell was comforted and made willing to go with her brother. The trip was, after all, a very pleasant one. She met a number of his friends, and found herself very happy in the home of their host. Too, it was pleasant to have cooking and housework off her mind for a week, and to go about with Austin looking at the pretty things she could not buy, and enjoying the beautiful parks and drives of the city. The expedition was far from a failure to her, though of course her shopping-excursion was spoiled.

School-days were at hand again, and it was with much satisfaction that Austin saw the children back in school. Harry had kept his promise and was now with them. He was a lad of thirteen, unusually tall and well-developed for his age. There was much in his bearing and manner to remind one of Austin, and he possessed a kindred spirit to that of his brother. But in his knocking about working when and where he could and "taking care of himself," as he called it, he had been sadly missing his chance for education. That he was now with them and busy in the schoolroom gave much pleasure to Austin, who could appreciate the need the boy would later find of learning.

CHAPTER 25

HARRY HILL

"I got it today," announced Austin at the supper-table.

"Oh, Austin! Will you have to go? What will become of all of us?" and the young faces about the table looked the grave concern each one felt. "I can

not tell. I hardly think so. If having a family keeps a man at home I think I can be exempted on that score," and he smiled cheerfully as he looked about him.

"But what should we do if they made you go? Who would take care of us?" said Lila anxiously.

"Do not worry little sister. I shall not go and leave you without protection," comforted her brother.

While Austin and his family had been fighting their own battles in life, many stirring events had been going on about them. There had come the call to arms when the whole nation had been stirred from center to circumference, and after that the sad, heart-rending times when the boys had been called away to the camps and later over the sea to the battle with their common foe. In all this Austin had been interested, but had hardly seemed a part of it, so engrossed had he been with his own perplexities. But now had come the call which included the boys yet in their teens, and he was now in the draft age. Today had come his summons from the Government to appear and be examined for enlistment in the service.

When Austin appeared before the board they greeted him with smiles. The manly form and apparent health of the young man appealed to them, and his youth naturally proclaimed him a man without family cares.

"It is easy to place such men as you are," said the officer.

"In what class do you think I should be placed?" inquired Austin.

"In first class, of course. You are in perfect health, and within the age limits, and too young to have a family."

"But what of dependents?"

"Dependents! Have you dependents?" asked the man in some surprize.

"Yes sir. I have a family of four or five entirely dependent upon my labor," answered Austin quietly.

"How is that? You stated your father was living," said the man. Then Austin explained his circumstances, and how he had been the sole support of the family now for months, and would continue to be so till they were able to care for themselves. The explanations were not at all complimentary to the father, but the facts had to be faced as they were. And later, as the children gave affidavit of their dependence upon him, he was freely excused from military service. Not all the brave soldiers went to the war.

The home that Austin and the children were making for themselves was not in a general way different from others. There were some things of necessity lacking which bless other homes. There was no mother in this home, no one for the children to go to for comfort and counsel such as only a mother can give. Amy and Nell were too young and inexperienced to know how to give either comfort or counsel. Lila and Doyle missed this part of normal

child-life very much. The other children could remember their mother; but these two were growing up without knowing a mother's love and care. And the girls were passing through the age when more than ever a girl needs a mother. They were not little paragons of wisdom and understanding, never making mistakes, always doing just what is right.

One of the problems of the family at this time was Harry. He had been separated from the family so long, and in knocking about for himself had built up a philosophy of life all his own. He was not a rebellious nor disobedient boy, but he had learned to make his own counsel and settle his own problems. It was hard for him to be under the strict rules that Austin thought right for his family. He could not feel that he was a perfect fit among the others. He was not a studious boy by nature and, though so young, had been missing most of the school-term for two years. It was bondage to him to sit all day in the schoolroom, and harder yet for him to know that he was dependent upon his brother for his support. Just as Austin had yearned for the feel of money of his own earning, so Harry longed to feel that he was entirely independent.

"Austin, I can not stand it any longer," and the speaker stood before his brother very straight and erect showing off to advantage every inch of his height. Austin was no higher than the boy before him, and they looked levelly into each other's eyes. "I do not like to go to school, I hate books, and I feel in prison in the schoolroom."

"But, Harry, you need the schooling very much. Think how you have been deprived of the privilege all your life. You are almost grown, and have never had a full term of school in your life."

"I know, Aus, that what you say is all true, and that I need the learning bad enough. But I can not stand it. I feel mean all the time. Here I am as able to work as you are, and yet I am taking life easy while you are bearing the whole burden."

"Do not look at it in that way, Harry. I am sure I do not. It is a pleasure to me to see all of you start off to school. That is the very thing I have been striving for, to give you children a chance to make good in life."

"Where is your chance coming in, I should like to know? You have kept the children most of the time since you were my age. It looks as if I ought to take care of myself and help you some. Why should I have a chance made for me while you make the chance for all the rest?"

"I am not complaining of my lot, Harry. I am only too glad to be able to work, and that I have been favored with that which brings us a good livelihood. I want you to stay in school. It is the thing you ought to do. There will be plenty of time for you to help after you have a few more years of school."

"Austin, I am going. I have made up my mind and I will not be turned. I shall get a job somewhere and look out for myself, and help you when I can. Possibly I can find a chance to get a little more schooling now and then, and yet not feel that I am a dead weight on you. My mind is not on school

now, and there is no use in my trying to keep at it any longer."

"Well, of course, Harry, if you have made up your mind like that, it is useless for me to say anything. But I am certain you are making a mistake, and you will see it some time. With the education you now have you can do only the hardest and most unpleasant labor. The door of opportunity will be closed to you on every hand, because you have not the knowledge necessary to enter in. I have been endeavoring to help you to prepare yourself."

"I have had as much opportunity for school already as you ever had. I shall be satisfied if I can make the wages you are making when I am as old. Do you not think I can do as well for myself alone, as you have done with so many to look after?"

"You will make good, Harry, I am certain of that. I did not mean to speak as if I had a doubt of you, and I do admire your spirit. But I know from experience that doors of opportunity do close in the face of a boy who is unlearned. I wanted to give you a better chance than I have ever had."

"I do not feel I have a right to take it. As soon as I can I shall help you care for the girls and Doyle. I say it is a shame the way things have gone. I am not mad at you that I am leaving, and I am not dissatisfied with what you have done for me. It is too easy a way for a fellow who can care for himself. So I will get out and find work as soon as I can."

Austin went on to his work with a heavy heart. Would it be so with all the children? Amy had treated the opportunity he had given her for school so lightly, and had chosen rather the frivolous pleasures of youth to a few years of application. Soon she would awaken to her mistake, but it would be after her chance was gone. Now Harry was flinging over his opportunity just as recklessly, though from a much better motive. But his good motive would not put knowledge into his head. That would come only by application to his books. Already Nell began to speak of the time when she could be spared to go out to earn money of her own. Oh, that he could make enough to keep them all satisfied! He did not stop to reason that the same love of independent earning had moved him in his earlier teens.

Harry found work with a farmer not many miles in the country, so that many of their Sundays were made pleasant by his company. And Nell rejoiced more than once in new clothes that his savings made possible for her. "I am proud of Harry," was the mental comment of Austin as he watched the steady progress of the boy.

Austin heard all sorts of laughing, and sarcastic, tearful, and mischievous remarks about something or other out in the living-room. His rest was disturbed, and he went out to see what was the matter.

"Here is some news for you, Austin. Guess what it is."

"Can't guess. You will have to tell."

"You have a new mother."

"A what?"

"A new mother. Here is a letter from Papa telling us about it."

The expression on Austin's face would be hard to describe, while his sisters were laughing at him. But what else could he expect? His father had been homeless for a long time.

"I should like to see her. I have always wanted a mother. I should like to live with them," announced Doyle, to the astonishment of the whole family.

"Are you not happy here, Doyle? Is this not a good home for you?" asked Austin, who felt hurt at what the child had said.

"Oh, this is all right. But I want a father and a mother," said Doyle.

There is a longing in the heart of a child for the love and protection of parents that no amount of sacrifice and devotion on the part of another can fill. Doyle could not remember his mother, and had little close association with his father. He loved Austin, but he could not get away from his longing for his parents.

Austin's brow clouded as he heard Doyle's wish, and saw the expression on the boy's face. It did not seem fair after the sacrifice he had made all these years, the way he had given his youth for them, that the boy should care more for his father and this unknown mother than he did for his home and the one who had made it possible.

Lila saw the look of pain on her brother's face and, slipping her hand into his, whispered, "I would never leave you, Austin. You are more to me than any one else. I wouldn't have any home but this."

Tears came to his eyes as he turned and gave the child a caress. He had not realized how his heart did yearn for such words.

CHAPTER 26

UNCLE PHILIP'S CHILDREN

A hasty step outside and a quick rap at the door brought Nell face to face with a messenger boy. He held a telegram in his hand, and asked, "Is Austin Hill here?"

"Yes. Austin," she called, for he was in the house. In a moment he was beside her and had taken the message from the hand of the boy and was reading it. After a hasty perusal he looked anxiously at Nell and said, "It is from Uncle Philip Hill. Aunt Minnie died this morning. There is no return message," he said turning to the boy and paying him his fee.

"Oh, Austin! Aunt Minnie dead! It can not be. Think of all those little children. What will Uncle Philip do?" and Nell's face showed the sorrow and

concern she felt.

"It is certainly a shock. I did not know that she was ill. I do not know, Nell, what he will do. He is such a helpless man, and has depended on Aunt Minnie as Papa did on our mother. Poor Aunt! She has carried her burden as long as she could, and had to lay it down before her task was done. The poor little children have lost their best friend." Austin's face was grave and sad, for his heart was touched in sympathy with the bereaved little ones.

"Six of them. Think of it, Austin! And Helen is not more than thirteen. She is only a few months older than Lila. Little John can not be two yet, and all of them without a mother!" Tears were bathing Nell's face as she spoke.

"Nell, we must go. We will find places for Lila and Doyle to stay for a few days, and we will hurry to them. Uncle Phil will not know what to do. It will be a terrible shock to him. He will need my help, and you can be a comfort to the poor children. How soon can you be ready!"

"It will not take me long. How soon can we get a train?"

"We can be out of here in less than two hours. Can you make it?"

"Yes," she said, and drying her tears she began her hasty preparations. At the appointed time they were on their way.

A few hours later they stood by the bier of their aunt and looked upon her toil-worn hands resting now so quietly, and touched affectionately the cold brow wearing at last a look of peace and rest. The years seemed to fall away from Austin and Nell and they were a little boy and girl once more by the side of their own dear dead. How it all came back to them; and with what sympathy they mingled their own tears with those of the new-made orphans!

Philip Hill had loved his wife, and leaned upon her. She had been strength and protection to him. Every perplexity and burden that had ever entered the home had lain more heavily upon her than upon him. He had been a careless man, and the poor little home and the roughened hands forever still told a story of hardship and poverty which his conscience told him might have been lessened. But it was too late now, and he could only pour out his heart in tears and sighs.

He was glad to see Austin and felt that his capable hands would remove from him present responsibilities till the dead was laid to rest. And the children clung to both Nell and Austin as their hope.

It was soon over and the neighbors and friends gone. Austin and his sister were yet in the home, and tonight were having a talk with their uncle to learn if possible his plans.

"What will you do, Uncle? The children will need care and attention. Helen is too young to take the place of housekeeper. Have you any plans for the future?"

"Austin, I do not know. Everything is a blank, a wall of darkness before me. I do not know where to turn, nor what to do. I hate to see the children scattered, but I do not see how I can keep them together as your father did you children. Can you give me any suggestion for my first turn? What shall I do with the children now?"

Austin sat in deep thought. The idea of children being scattered among strangers, never knowing family ties with their own, was like a monster to him. What he had fought so hard to hold from his own, now was being poured out upon his helpless little cousins. A thought of help and succor came again and again to his mind, but he remembered how frail Nell was for any added burden. Her sharp eyes saw the struggle and doubt in his mind, and she knew his thoughts.

"Austin, couldn't we take the three little ones home with us? Uncle could manage with the three older ones till he can make some arrangements."

"Nell, it would add much to your already full hands. It hardly seems fair to you," Austin said hesitatingly.

"I would certainly count it a great favor. As soon as I could I would end things up here and come to Weston with the others, and perhaps could find a way to care for them," said their uncle.

"We can not go away and leave the little things without some one to look after them," said Nell decidedly. So it was planned that Austin and Nell should take the three younger ones home with them. The oldest of the three was only six, and the baby was less than two years old. Nell did not realize then what she was undertaking. Their friends at Weston lifted their hands in dismay when they saw the increase in Austin's family. "Is the boy mad to undertake such a thing?" some of them asked. But Austin and Nell plodded on doing their best with their new responsibilities. It was already late in the week when they came home. The next Sunday morning Austin came into his place in Sunday-school with little John on his arm and with another tiny toddler at his side.

A few weeks passed by and their uncle came with the three older children. He seemed to drop them with a sigh of relief at Austin's door. Though it had been understood that the arrangement was only temporary, it was soon seen that Uncle Philip felt little more responsibility when he once had the children under Austin's hand.

Now, Nell was an authoritative little body, bearing, as she had, responsibilities all too heavy for a child. Lila and Doyle had found that she was an exacting mistress, and often even Austin had been puzzled to know how to curb and direct her authoritative inclinations. The coming of the three little ones had not been so hard, for the natural mother-instinct in her enjoyed caring for their helplessness. But Helen and her two brothers was another proposition entirely. She felt from the first that it was too much, and as her authority was completely set aside by her mischievous young cousins, they kept her in a continual ferment. Austin could not turn the children out of the house, nor could he prevail on his

uncle to find homes for them.

At last Austin saw that the burden was entirely too much for his sister and that her health as well as her nerves and temper were breaking under it, and he demanded action of his uncle.

"Something will have to be done, or my home will be broken up. I can not keep house without Nell, and she will not stay with me much longer. Helen and Lila can not get along, and the boys are a constant source of annoyance to Nell. I can not be there and attend to my work also, and I never leave the house but they get into some kind of a brawl. You will have to do something, or I will." This brought his uncle to action; but a half dozen children are not distributed in a day, if proper homes are found.

Austin could not even in his perplexity demand impossibilities of his uncle, and must wait as patiently as he could till the six were properly located. Nell wept at giving up the baby; but Austin saw it was too much for her to try to keep him. At last they were alone again, just the four of them about their home table. Sundays brought Harry and sometimes Amy to dinner with them. Not many weeks passed that some of Uncle Philip's children were not with them for a meal or two, for to them Austin's house seemed home.

Austin hoped that now the storm had passed Nell would be herself again. But in this he was mistaken. Her nerves had been under too great a strain for her to regain her composure. It was evident that she needed a rest and change.

"Nell, would you like to take a few weeks' visit somewhere this summer, or a trip to some place of change and recreation?" asked Austin kindly one day.

"Oh, yes! I should like to go anywhere that would take me away from here. I want to be free of cooking and dish-washing for a while. If I could only be a girl a while instead of a housewife! I am so tired of it all that I can hardly stand it."

"I see how you feel, Nell, and I have been planning a way for you. The Freeman's have told me they would be glad to take you with them on their trip this summer, and I should like to have you go, if it pleases you."

"But what will you do? Lila can not keep house. She is too young, and she could not manage Doyle. He is all I can manage sometimes."

"Doyle has never gotten rid of that desire to go to his father. It occurs to me that he ought to have a chance to try it out. I could send him down there for the summer, and Lila and I could make out very well. If you wish to go, do so, and stay as long as you want to. Only remember you have a welcome home whenever you want to come. So study it over and tell me what you decide."

CHAPTER 27

THE FAMILY CIRCLE NARROWS

"Lila, little sister, how would you like to be my housekeeper this summer? I am thinking of sending Nell away for a good rest and change. Amy and Harry will seldom be here, and you would have the house all to yourself." Nell was out for the afternoon, and Doyle was busy down the street, leaving Lila alone in the house. Austin had chosen this quiet time to have a good heart-to-heart talk with Lila.

"But Doyle! I fear I could not manage him. He does not like to obey Nell, and I could not do a thing with him. He is a naughty boy when you are away. I am afraid he would plague me nearly to death." Lila spoke frankly, not because she did not love her brother, but because what she had to say was truth. Doyle was too active a boy to be shut up in the narrow quarters his town home afforded.

"We could hardly expect Doyle to obey you who are so little older than he. He does tease you and Nell dreadfully, I know; but he has so little to occupy his mind, and he hates the housework Nell gives him to do. No boy thrives on dish-washing. We will not blame him too severely for his naughtiness. I am thinking of letting him go down to Papa's this summer, and if he wishes to stay longer he may. He desires to go I am certain, and on the farm he would have plenty to keep him busy. If you also would rather go away for the summer, I think either Wilbur or George would be glad to have you go to his home for a good visit. In fact, ever since George made us that visit he has felt it would only be right for him to have one of you girls. You would have a very pleasant time in either home. But if you prefer to remain here with me, we can keep house well enough. I can help you with the heavy work out of my work-hours, and will arrange to have some one with you at night when I have to be away. Besides, I intend to get a piano, and you may have lessons on that while the girls are away. What do you say?"

"I will stay with you. And I shall enjoy the music-lessons. Are you really going to get us a piano? I would rather be here with you than anywhere else. And the housework will be fun when I can manage it to suit myself. Nell always wants to boss it, and I almost hate it sometimes; but I shall like to manage."

Austin laughed at Lila's earnestness before he said, "I fear there is a streak of bossiness in every one of us. I am well developed on that line, Amy and Nell are my close seconds, and here you are getting the same characteristic. Well, if you stay with me you can 'boss' to your heart's content."

"Austin," and Lila spoke confidentially, "why does Doyle want to go down to the farm? I do not want a new mother. She could not be like our own mother. And I hardly know Papa."

"Doyle does not remember his own mother at all, and he has longed all his life for a mother's love. He wants a father and mother like other boys

have, and I can not blame him. Then he loves the farm and would rather be there than anywhere else. All his talk is about a farm and farm-work. I think it will be better for him to go. Papa is not drinking now, and will do very well by him. We must not think that Papa has no love for his children, nor that he would not have any of us with him. He was lonely, and had much to discourage him in the past."

"I had not thought of it in that way," said Lila softly. "Perhaps Papa does love us a little after all."

"Doyle," said Austin one day when they had a chance for a quiet talk alone, "do you yet wish to go to your father and his new wife?"

"Yes, Austin, I do," answered the boy earnestly.

"Why are you dissatisfied with your home here? Have I not made it comfortable and homelike for you?" questioned Austin, who could hardly help feeling that the boy's sentiments reproached him.

"It is not that, Austin. I am happy enough here, and satisfied with all you have done for me. But I want a father and a mother. I see other fellows with their parents, and it makes me lonesome. I feel as if I were not getting my share. There can be no one to really take the place of a fellow's father and mother, can there? I want to be with them and call them Father and Mother."

"You are right, Doyle. There can no one take the place of a mother, and it ought to be that way with a father. I have tried to fill both places to you children, but after all I am only a big brother. I have a proposition for you. I will let you go to your father this summer as soon as school is out, and you may stay till fall, and then if you like it better than you do here you may remain with your father. You know what life is here, and when you have tried that out, decide what you will do. I shall hate to give you up, but if you want your father and he wants you, I have no right to keep you apart."

"Oh, Austin, thank you!" exclaimed the boy. "There is nothing in town. I want to go to the country, where I can drive and ride the horses and bring in the cows, and go hunting, and climb trees. There is everything out there, and nothing here but to help Nell with the housework, and I hate that."

"You get tree-climbing here, if I may judge from your torn coats and trousers; but of course the other things belong to the country. You may try it out. We are going to give Nell a rest for the summer, and with you gone Lila and I can make out very well. How do you think you will like the new Mother?"

"All right. Harry has been down there, you know, and he says she is nice, and wants me to come. Have you written Papa yet to know if he wants me?"

"Yes, and he is eager for you to come. He gets lonely without any of us children since he is settled in his new home. They will make you welcome,

and I believe you will like it."

The little boy skipped off, eager to impart his good news to some of his friends. He was going to have the dearest wish of his heart fulfilled in going to his country home.

"Austin, here is a letter from Amy with great news in it. She is soon to be married, and wants to come home to make ready. What shall I tell her?" said Nell one day.

"This is Amy's home. She has the same right here as have the others," said Austin, adding anxiously, "I wonder what choice she has made."

There followed a whirl of busy days after Amy came home, then the flitting of the young bride to her new home. Austin gave a sigh of relief, as many a parent has done, when at last he saw his restless sister anchored in a home of her own. He had followed her movements anxiously, for he knew there were many temptations for her in the care-free life she appeared to be living.

"What is your decision, Nell?" asked Austin one day some time after they had talked over the summer's outing.

"I have decided to go with the Freemans. I do not know how long I shall stay; but if I like it I shall stay all summer. I feel as if I never wanted to come back to the round of housework and cooking. I am so, oh, so tired of it all! But maybe I shall get homesick when I am once away."

The first of June came, closing the term of school, and the next day Doyle was ready to start for the farm. So jubilant was he that he did not see the pained look on Austin's face, nor for one moment saw the wound it was to Austin that he could part with his home so easily. Austin's whole life was bound up in his home. He had not the experience to know that practically every boy of Doyle's age, and placed in the same circumstances, would do as he did; nor did he realize that because the children had been but the receivers of his gifts of love and sacrifice, they could not comprehend what it had all meant to him. After a while, when they had met life as all must meet it, they would look back and understand what he had done, and what he had felt. This home for the children had cost him his youth and youthful ambitions, and to part with it would have been like giving up life and hope; but to the children it was just home, and that a home with limitations.

A few days later Nell was off for her summer's outing, and Lila and Austin were home alone. How quiet and calm it seemed! And how they enjoyed themselves! Lila was busy with her music and the light housekeeping necessary for the two of them, and Austin came and went to and from his daily work with a heart freer from care than he had done for a long time.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Lila over the contents of a letter in her hand. "The summer is not half gone and Nell is coming back. I thought I was to be housekeeper all summer. Oh, dear!"

"Surely my little sister is going to make Nell welcome! Think of all that

Nell has been to us and our home ever since we began it," said Austin soothingly.

"But Nell is cross, and she wants everything to go her way," protested Lila with a scowl on her face.

"I know, Lila, that Nell is impatient sometimes. But she has not been well. She has had to work too hard, and we must be patient with her. Let us make her welcome, and then I believe everything will go right. Cheer up," said Austin happily.

Nell had found her outing much different from what she had thought it would be. She was a home body, and when she got away from the familiar scenes, and rested a little from the heavy work, she began to long for the dear home circle. Besides, she feared that Lila could not keep up the housework as it should be done. So she had decided to return long before the summer was ended.

In spite of Lila's protests, she took up her old responsibilities, and left the little girl free for her music and recreations. Austin was glad to have Nell with them again, for he had not altogether approved of leaving Lila so much alone.

Autumn came, bringing a letter from Doyle saying that he had decided to stay on the farm, assuring his brother that he was perfectly satisfied with life as he found it there. Austin's answer was a complete release of the child, so that he no longer was counted in the family circle.

Harry was home very little, but when he came he brought good cheer and comradeship with him. He was fond of Nell, and found pleasure in spending a part of his means in buying her pretty clothes. Nell was handy with her needle, and was wise in the choice of both materials and styles, and so was able to go out carefully and tastefully dressed.

Home seemed to have settled once more into steady lines, with just the three in the family. But as this was a bark that seldom rested in quiet seas, another storm-cloud was seen arising, and it was larger than a man's hand.

Chapter 28

A STORMY SEASON

One day Austin sat in his room in deep and troubled thought. It had been many months since such a burden lay on his heart. He was perplexed as well as troubled. That there must be a way out of his trial he knew, but where to find it was his problem. There had been many times in his life when he had longed for some older and wiser one than himself to guide him and his family through the rocks that threatened the little bark, but never did he feel that lack as now. The very foundations of his home were at stake.

Every home must have its breadwinner and its home-maker. Ever since that day on which Nell had made her promise to stand by him and do her best, she had filled the place of home-maker to his satisfaction. There had been times when she had grown restless with the confinement of it, and he had arranged for her to be relieved or to have a change of employment for a time; but always she had come back with renewed love and zeal for her home. He had expected her always to be so.

Austin was young in years, but his struggle with the real problems of life had developed his nature until he thought and felt as a man ten years older. In his mind his home was a permanent thing. There was, for him, to be no leaving of the old home and going out to make a new one. This was his home in as strong a sense as the word could ever be used. Whatever threatened this establishment was placing his earthly happiness in jeopardy. He was ready to rise and defend it with all his strength.

With Nell it was different. When she had given her promise to Austin to help him with the undertaking, she had felt the need of the shelter home would give. She was a little girl then, now she was at the door of womanhood. Instinctively she felt that this was not always to be her home, and she had a longing for the freedom, that normal girlhood feels, from responsibility and care. She longed to go out, as other girls went, to face the battles and make the conquests of life. It seemed to her that unless she made a bold dash for freedom her whole life would be given up to dull household tasks.

These vague longings and dissatisfied thoughts caused Nell to lose interest in her home duties. And in turning her attention to outside affairs she, for lack of experience and of the wise, guiding hand of a mother, began placing her affections and desires upon those things that are very enticing to youth but which do not bring the best good. It seemed to her that better clothes, more social activity, worldly amusements, and entire freedom from restraint would bring her the opportunities and the pleasures she craved. Since there was coming to her, as comes to every girl, that indefinite time when she must "settle down in life," why should she not have her good times now!

Austin saw, or thought he saw, the course these "good times" would take, and their final outcome. Nell was impulsive and strong willed; she had no mother to guide her, and he feared the results of a period of wildness. He needed her help in the home, help that she could not give with a divided mind. He was a Christian at heart, one who had covenanted to live by the Word of God, leaving all that was "of the world" behind. He wanted his home to be in every sense a Christian home. It disappointed him that Nell was choosing the world.

But Austin, sitting alone in his room, did not reason things out as we have done here; he only felt and suffered. Nell, his strong right hand, was failing him. She would defy his rules, close her ears to his entreaties, and disobey his commands, going out when and where she pleased, choosing her own company and keeping her own counsels. Not understanding the nature of the change that had come over her, not reasoning back to the real cause, he blamed her and censured her actions. He had hoped to find in Nell one

who would understand his purpose in life, and who would fall in with his plans completely. It was such a bitter disappointment to find her unwilling to do so.

Austin had much decision and real sternness in his make-up. Since Nell would not yield to his entreaties, he felt he must compel her to listen to reason. The methods he had used in times of rebellion when the children were smaller were of no value now, and some new plan must be found whereby he could humble Nell's heart and cause her to walk the path he thought was best for her. He so much enjoyed their mutual comradeship and cooperation, and he believed she set a high value on them also. To refrain from talking with her, to keep a reserved, austere silence toward her except when speech was absolutely necessary, would surely bring her to her senses quicker than anything. He was not angry with her, but came to this deliberate decision because he believed it to be the best way to waken her to her errors.

One more serious talk with Nell, a defiant attitude on her part, and he began his discipline. Then followed weeks of pain. Nell would not submit, and Austin would not yield. It was a characteristic of the boy, as we have already seen, to follow a course he believed to be right in spite of all the opposition that might come against him. If he thought a principle of right or justice was at stake, nothing could turn him. The silence of the home was oppressive and more dangerous than words. The girls misunderstood Austin's silence and called it anger and pouts. Nell, who for a while forgot her old loyalty to Austin, spoke of his behavior outside the family circle and caused evil reports to go out about him.

There was one who was, perhaps, more concerned about their trouble than any one else. She was a warm friend of both Austin's and Nellie's. To her Nell unburdened her heart, and the strong, true heart of Bessie Allison was stirred with sympathy and compassion for them both.

"Bessie, I can hardly stand it at home these days. Austin is terrible. He pouts around and won't say a word, and has lost all his love for me. Home will never be as it once was, for I will not give in and mind him in every little thing as if I were only a child," Nell had confided bitterly.

"Don't Nell, don't talk that way. Austin is not pouting, as you think, but he is trying to help you see your mistake. He means right. You know that he does, Nell. Think of all the past, and how he has stood by you."

"Yes, I know, Bessie, that he has done nobly by us. But he does not understand us girls, and thinks we ought to obey him like children. I can't do it, and I will not."

Bessie was a woman of prayer, and often she carried their troubles to the throne of grace. She knew that Austin was making a sad mistake in the position he was taking, that it was hardening Nell and Lila both, and that it was bringing upon him criticism from their friends and neighbors. She could not see how any good could come of it.

"Austin," she had said one day, "can you not see that you are making a mistake with Nell, and bringing on yourself needless criticism? Why are you

taking this course, anyway?"

"She must obey me," he said firmly. "Nell taunts me with anger, and says I am pouting, but I am neither angry nor pouting. I have decided to keep this silence till she submits."

"It is a great mistake, Austin. Nell will not submit. She misunderstands your actions. You are driving her farther from God. I shall pray our heavenly Father to give you humility to count yourself defeated. Nell is not a child any longer, and you can not force her to be obedient to you, not in this way at least, and you will prove my words to be true. An example of humility from you now will heal matters better than anything you can do."

For years Austin, against the opinions of others, had resolutely stood to what he thought was right. It was this steadfastness of character that had brought him through many hard-fought battles. And the process had developed tenacity and determination to what was out of balance with his humility and consideration for the opinions and consciences of others. From his point of view this affair was his and Nell's, and did not concern his friends and acquaintances. His fighting-blood was up. But the words of Bessie, spoken so sincerely and kindly, began to reach his understanding, and at last he unbent.

"Nellie, I do not approve of your conduct. I am sorry for your attitude in the home and toward its responsibilities. But I see that I have gone too far in my attempt to force submission. I am sorry for the mistake I have made." This he said to her one day. So the long silence was broken, but without any submission on Nell's part. Her heart was just as restless as it had been before. It was plain that she could not make herself willing to remain with her home responsibility. Someway the burden of it had slipped from her shoulders.

Austin considered the turn his sister had taken; and while he could not understand it, and in his heart censured her considerably, yet he had his old desire to make her happy if possible.

"Nell," he said, "I shall not hold you longer. I want you to feel as free to go as the others have been. While I have tried to give you a good home, and have done the best I understood in that endeavor, yet I would not force it upon you. If you wish to visit your brothers or any other of your relatives, I will provide means for you to make the journey. Or if you wish to go to work downtown, you may do that. Do not feel bound to the housework any longer, for my sake."

"I do not know what I want to do. But I shall go somewhere soon. Do not worry about me, for I can look out for myself," she answered. Her choice was to go on a long journey, to a distant State; and soon the home circle numbered but two.

Amy Hill Morton sat in her little dining-room, her arms resting on the table, and a letter before her over which she was poring with a frown on her pretty face. The letter was from Nell, and set forth in frank, girlish

manner, her dissatisfaction with the home-management. "You know how you felt, Amy, how you could not bear to be dictated to, and you remember that Austin wanted to tell you where to go and who to be with. You could not stand it, and I can't either. When I leave I am going to let Aus know that I can look out for myself."

"Oh, Nell! what ails you?" she half sobbed. "Poor Austin! I wonder if every one of us children will be a separate disappointment to him! I know I have been nothing else. If I could have it to do over again I would let him see how much I do appreciate his sacrifice and devotion. I do not regret getting married; but I never realized till now what it has meant for him to settle down and give all his young life for us. Ned and I have a time to keep our two selves going on his wages, yet Austin managed to support all of us. I know he never had a care-free day in his life. He knows nothing but responsibility. He never was young. I am sorry for every unkind word and act I ever gave him. I am going to write Nell a letter telling her just what I think of her plans." Suiting her actions to her words, she wrote a long letter to Nell, pouring out her heart in sisterly fashion.

"What if Austin has made mistakes! Look over them. You can not expect him to be faultless when we are so full of faults. Stay at home, Nell, and make him a home as long as he needs you. He has done more for you than has any one else. No one cares for you as he does. Do not grieve him by your lack of appreciation," were some of the things she wrote. Nell was touched by the appeal, for she was tender-hearted; but it did not change her purpose. She went on with her preparations, and Austin was compelled to face the problem of life without her.

CHAPTER 29

AUSTIN'S NEW HOME

"How is life serving you these days, Austin?" asked his companion quietly, for the expression of the young man's face showed that he was facing some perplexity. He had sought opportunity for a confidential talk with an older friend whom he knew was interested in all his affairs.

"It seems my life is a long series of crises, and I face one now that is exceedingly perplexing. I should like to lay the matter before you and obtain your opinion as to what I should do. I have come to where my path seems to break and I do not know which way to go, yet God knows my heart, that I want only his will done in me. You have heard, possibly, that Nell has deserted me? I do not blame her, poor girl, for her part has not been an easy one. Then, too, the way I allowed her to be overburdened when we had Uncle's children has been against her. Though she was as willing as I was to help him out, the overwork was too much for her nerves, and she has suffered from it. Besides that, she seems to be filled with the same restlessness that attacked Amy. I shall just have to let her face her own problems her own way, I suppose," and a sigh slipped from his lips. Where is the parent of grown children who has not sighed the same way?

"I think, Austin, that you have expected both Amy and Nell to be like your self in steadiness and singleness of purpose, when you have not really had any youth. Possibly the very fact that you had to fight off every youthful inclination and be a mature man before your time, for the sake of your family, has placed you where you can not sympathize with their fickleness. Really, Austin, they are girls, just girls. You can not judge their actions by the standard with which you judge your own, for your view-points are vastly different," reasoned his friend.

"I think I have expected them to fill the places of full-grown women. I am certain much of our trouble has been right there. Another thing I am thoroughly convinced of is that girls need the guidance of an older woman. Both Amy and Nell have worked out problems in their own way and come to conclusions that would never have been reached had they been guided by an older and wiser person," said Austin.

"Yes, you are right. A child can be cared for by nurses and teachers, but when a girl reaches her teen age she needs a mother, or some one who can take the place of a mother," agreed his friend.

"Now you come to my point of perplexity. I think that in failing to recognize this fact I have failed to quite an extent with Amy and Nell. I can excuse myself because they were so little younger than I, and were spoiled for lack of control when I took them. But with Lila it is different. I have had her a great portion of her life, and I feel a responsibility that I never did with the others. But she is just now where she needs mother-care the most. Already I begin to see signs of the same restlessness and wilfulness that has spoiled the other girls. She is such a sweet child, and I want her to make good. But what am I to do? Can you give me any counsel?"

"Do you and Lila expect to keep house the same as ever?"

"Ought we? She wants us to, and is distressed if I mention any other arrangement. So far as the work is concerned, with my help she could get along very well. But she would be alone too much for one so young; and besides, she is not developing along the lines I wish to see her develop. She is very enthusiastic just now over the idea of being my housekeeper, and thinks it would be the best of fun. But she will in time become tired of the responsibility, and I shall have the same old trial over again."

"Could you not secure a competent housekeeper who would be able to take the oversight of the girl as well, and thus save the day?"

"I might, if such a person could be found. But it is a difficult matter to find a person capable of coming into a home and taking the reins in the manner you suggest. Such women already have their places. Lila would not be easily managed, especially if she should be approached in the wrong manner. She has a peculiar temperament, but is tractable enough if one understands her. She would likely resent any interference from one whom she would consider an outsider. I have no idea where I could find a person who would answer the need."

"That plan would depend entirely upon the disposition of the person employed. It would indeed be hard to find one who would take a motherly interest in the girl. Have you any other plans?"

"Yes. If I could find a home for Lila where she would be made welcome and given kind, thoughtful mother-care, I should be glad to put her in it. I should of course support her and pay well for her care. What do you think of that plan?"

"What would you do, Austin?"

"I suppose I should have to close the house and board. Boarding would not appeal to me after having the family. I believe I should die of loneliness. Even with Lila it is very trying for me at times."

"That would be unfair to you. You are a home-lover. For a home you have given all your young years, and now to be thrown out with no roof of your own would be harder for you than you now imagine. Besides, breaking the home now would be such a financial sacrifice. In a few years you will wish to begin your home again from a different angle and motive; for you will find you are not different from other men. It seems such a loss and waste. I wish your home could be preserved," said his friend with marked earnestness.

"I have thought of all those things. So I am waiting to see what I ought to do. I hate to give up my home, and I confess it looks dreary ahead of me."

Here the conversation was interrupted and never taken up again. Austin returned to his cottage home to consider further his problem.

"Lila, would you like to have me find you a good home somewhere with a woman who could give you more care than I am able to? You must get lonely here, when I am away so many hours each day; and I can not feel restful about you. Do you not think the other plan would be better?" Austin questioned of his sister.

"No, Austin, I do not want you to do that. You are the only one I want to be with, and this home is good enough for me," she said decidedly.

Again that sigh. What should he do? What was best? And all those dreams and aspirations of a life of usefulness for God! Where were they and what were they? Only imaginations? Or had he received a call from God? A few more years at longest, and he should be free of his family responsibilities, and then where should he turn? Questions, one after another, forced themselves upon him; but he was powerless to answer.

Another plan sweeter and better than all the rest stood ever before him; but he could not be certain it would be for the best. This plan would not only bridge over the present perplexity, but it would change his whole life. What if it should end in disappointment! But the plan was ever before him. Why should he look for an elderly lady for his housekeeper? There was Bessie Allison! With Bessie's strong heart and capable hand the tangles of his home-life would unravel, and all would go well. Besides, there was

Bessie herself.

Austin was no longer a boy, and his heart yearned for something in his home-life which his younger brothers and sisters could not give him.

If Bessie was willing, and he learned that she was, his home would be preserved in the happiest way possible. Besides, Bessie's interests and energies were turned toward that life of usefulness for which he craved. They would be one in their service to God.

When he had considered all this, and had learned that his plans and hopes found a hearty echo in the true heart of Bessie, the clouds that had been hanging so low were all cleared away, and life looked bright and rosy again.

To these arrangements Lila gave a glad approval, and welcomed her new sister warmly. Nell was glad also for the change in Austin's affairs, for though she could not bring herself to be willing to take up the burden of housekeeping, yet her conscience kept her continually unhappy at the thought of his perplexity and trial. This was a happy way out for all. Harry and Amy and Doyle all rejoiced with them that the home had been preserved.

Thus with the clouds rolled away and the sunshine of love and hope smiling upon them, Bessie and Austin began their life together.

CHAPTER 30

THE OPINIONS OF PARSON HAWLEY AND HIS WIFE

"Austin and Bessie were married last evening," remarked Parson Hawley, one of Austin's well-wishers, to his wife as he stretched his feet out at his own fireside.

"I am glad to hear it," was his wife's happy rejoinder. "Austin is a fine young man, and Bessie will make him a good, true helpmeet. May the sun shine brightly on their lives all the way."

"What is your prophecy on Austin's life, my dear?" the good man continued. "We have watched him rear his family, and have noted many of his cares and responsibilities, and have felt for him in his perplexities and difficulties. Has he succeeded in what he undertook? Have the results rewarded his sacrifice?"

"I could answer your questions better a few years hence. Look at our own children. Did it always seem as if they were going to repay us for the care and toil we gave them? When they were in the transition stage of life, as Austin's children now are, did they show the effect of our efforts as we wished them to? I think not. I remember sleepless nights and care-worn days when it seemed that one or the other would surely bring us sorrow. And there were two of us of mature years. Wait till Austin's children have

another ten years on their heads and then you can better judge. This one thing I do know, that it is an impossibility that boys and girls should live with a man who has lived and is living as Austin, whose whole life has been one of unselfish sacrifice and devotion, and not be the better for it."

"You are right, Wife. We have all expected them to be just like him, when that would have been an impossibility. But do the children appreciate what he has done as they should?"

"Ah, Henry, what a question for a man of your age to ask! Do the children appreciate what he has done! Did you ever see children in their teens who appreciated what their rearing had cost, not in dollars and cents, but in tears and prayers and pain? I think not. Just wait till those children have felt the load of responsibility settle upon their shoulders, fitting itself to their capacity; just let them shed a few tears of sorrow and anguish, and let them sacrifice, as they will do, for love's sweet sake--and then they will appreciate him and all he has done."

"That is so, Mother. We had to wait a while before our children could understand the reason for some of our dealings with them. But now we do not regret our toil and care, since we are rewarded by their love and appreciation. Come to think of it, we did not have that object in view in their training. It was not for our pleasure, but for their good that we worked."

"And so it has been with Austin. He gave his young life for them. He has done his duty by them, and he is a better man for it. Even if he saw no reward in them, what it has done for him has been worth it all. See his strength of character, the earnestness and purpose of life; look at Austin as we know him, and can we say that he is not already reaping the reward of his efforts and sacrifice?"

"Character," said the good man, after a while, "character is not a gift but a growth. With Austin it found good soil to grow in, and he has given it the right kind of cultivation--sacrifice, devotion to a noble purpose, honesty, sincerity--to make it develop well. Yes, you are right. It has paid. I was thinking of what he had given up for them. The pleasures of youth, the fun and the frolic that other boys get. But they are of lesser value, while he has tasted of the real things of life. Yes, it has all paid well."

"But let us not think that the children are even now ungrateful. Amy is quick to praise him and what he has done; she sees many things in a new light since wifedom and motherhood have come to her. And Harry, while he never could bear to depend on Austin, realizes quite forcibly what his brother has done. Nell is at her most thoughtless age, but down in her heart she appreciates her brother; the stamp of his life will be found in her, you may be certain. Lila is devoted to him. And he has many, many friends and admirers."

"What will his life be from now on? Will he continue to develop? Will he realize those early hopes and desires? What do you say?"

"I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet,' so I shall not answer those questions. But I know this, that he has chosen a helpmeet who will be an encouragement and help to him in becoming all that God would have him to be. The future lies in the hand of God. May he bless them and make them all

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