GEORGE MACDONALD

THE SEABOARD PARISH, VOLUME 1

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
HOMILETIC

Dear Friends,—I am beginning a new book like an old sermon; but, as you know, I have been so accustomed to preach all my life, that whatever I say or write will more or less take the shape of a sermon; and if you had not by this time learned at least to bear with my oddities, you would not have wanted any more of my teaching. And, indeed, I did not think you would want any more. I thought I had bidden you farewell. But I am seated once again at my writing-table, to write for you—with a strange feeling, however, that I am in the heart of some curious, rather awful acoustic contrivance, by means of which the words which I have a habit of whispering over to myself as I write them, are heard aloud by multitudes of people whom I cannot see or hear. I will favour the fancy, that, by a sense of your presence, I may speak the more truly, as man to man.

But let me, for a moment, suppose that I am your grandfather,

and that you have all come to beg for a story; and that, therefore, as usually happens in such cases, I am sitting with a puzzled face, indicating a more puzzled mind. I know that there are a great many stories in the holes and corners of my brain; indeed, here is one, there is one, peeping out at me like a rabbit; but alas, like a rabbit, showing me almost at the same instant the tail-end of it, and vanishing with a contemptuous *thud* of its hind feet on the ground. For I must have suitable regard to the desires of my children. It is a fine thing to be able to give people what they want, if at the same time you can give them what you want. To give people what they want, would sometimes be to give them only dirt and poison. To give them what you want, might be to set before them something of which they could not eat a mouthful. What both you and I want, I am willing to think, is a dish of good wholesome venison. Now I suppose my children around me are neither young enough nor old enough to care about a fairy tale, go that will not do. What they want is, I believe, something that I know about—that has happened to myself. Well, I confess, that is the kind of thing I like best to hear anybody talk to me about. Let anyone tell me something that has happened to himself, especially if he will give me a peep into how his heart took it, as it sat in its own little room with the closed door, and that person will, so telling, absorb my attention: he has something true and genuine and valuable to communicate. They are mostly old people that can do so. Not that young people have nothing happen to them; but that only when they grow old, are they able

to see things right, to disentangle confusions, and judge righteous judgment. Things which at the time appeared insignificant or wearisome, then give out the light that was in them, show their own truth, interest, and influence: they are far enough off to be seen. It is not when we are nearest to anything that we know best what it is. How I should like to write a story for old people! The young are always having stories written for them. Why should not the old people come in for a share? A story without a young person in it at all! Nobody under fifty admitted! It could hardly be a fairy tale, could it? Or a love story either? I am not so sure about that. The worst of it would be, however, that hardly a young person would read it. Now, we old people would not like that. We can read young people's books and enjoy them: they would not try to read old men's books or old women's books; they would be so sure of their being dry. My dear old brothers and sisters, we know better, do we not? We have nice old jokes, with no end of fun in them; only they cannot see the fun. We have strange tales, that we know to be true, and which look more and more marvellous every time we turn them over again; only somehow they do not belong to the ways of this year—I was going to say *week*,—and so the young people generally do not care to hear them. I have had one pale-faced boy, to be sure, who will sit at his mother's feet, and listen for hours to what took place before he was born. To him his mother's wedding-gown was as old as Eve's coat of skins. But then he was young enough not yet to have had a chance of losing the childhood common to the young

and the old. Ah! I should like to write for you, old men, old women, to help you to read the past, to help you to look for the future. Now is your salvation nearer than when you believed; for, however your souls may be at peace, however your quietness and confidence may give you strength, in the decay of your earthly tabernacle, in the shortening of its cords, in the weakening of its stakes, in the rents through which you see the stars, you have yet your share in the cry of the creation after the sonship. But the one thing I should keep saying to you, my companions in old age, would be, "Friends, let us not grow old." Old age is but a mask; let us not call the mask the face. Is the acorn old, because its cup dries and drops it from its hold—because its skin has grown brown and cracks in the earth? Then only is a man growing old when he ceases to have sympathy with the young. That is a sign that his heart has begun to wither. And that is a dreadful kind of old age. The heart needs never be old. Indeed it should always be growing younger. Some of us feel younger, do we not, than when we were nine or ten? It is not necessary to be able to play at leapfrog to enjoy the game. There are young creatures whose turn it is, and perhaps whose duty it would be, to play at leap-frog if there was any necessity for putting the matter in that light; and for us, we have the privilege, or if we will not accept the privilege, then I say we have the duty, of enjoying their leap-frog. But if we must withdraw in a measure from sociable relations with our fellows, let it be as the wise creatures that creep aside and wrap themselves up and lay themselves by that their wings may grow

and put on the lovely hues of their coming resurrection. Such a withdrawing is in the name of youth. And while it is pleasant —no one knows how pleasant except him who experiences it —to sit apart and see the drama of life going on around him, while his feelings are calm and free, his vision clear, and his judgment righteous, the old man must ever be ready, should the sweep of action catch him in its skirts, to get on his tottering old legs, and go with brave heart to do the work of a true man, none the less true that his hands tremble, and that he would gladly return to his chimney-corner. If he is never thus called out, let him examine himself, lest he should be falling into the number of those that say, "I go, sir," and go not; who are content with thinking beautiful things in an Atlantis, Oceana, Arcadia, or what it may be, but put not forth one of their fingers to work a salvation in the earth. Better than such is the man who, using just weights and a true balance, sells good flour, and never has a thought of his own.

I have been talking—to my reader is it? or to my supposed group of grandchildren? I remember—to my companions in old age. It is time I returned to the company who are hearing my whispers at the other side of the great thundering gallery. I take leave of my old friends with one word: We have yet a work to do, my friends; but a work we shall never do aright after ceasing to understand the new generation. We are not the men, neither shall wisdom die with us. The Lord hath not forsaken his people because the young ones do not think just as the old ones choose.

The Lord has something fresh to tell them, and is getting them ready to receive his message. When we are out of sympathy with the young, then I think our work in this world is over. It might end more honourably.

Now, readers in general, I have had time to consider what to tell you about, and how to begin. My story will be rather about my family than myself now. I was as it were a little withdrawn, even by the time of which I am about to write. I had settled into a gray-haired, quite elderly, yet active man—young still, in fact, to what I am now. But even then, though my faith had grown stronger, life had grown sadder, and needed all my stronger faith; for the vanishing of beloved faces, and the trials of them that are dear, will make even those that look for a better country both for themselves and their friends, sad, though it will be with a preponderance of the first meaning of the word *sad*, which was *settled*, *thoughtful*.

I am again seated in the little octagonal room, which I have made my study because I like it best. It is rather a shame, for my books cover over every foot of the old oak panelling. But they make the room all the pleasanter to the eye, and after I am gone, there is the old oak, none the worse, for anyone who prefers it to books.

I intend to use as the central portion of my present narrative the history of a year during part of which I took charge of a friend's parish, while my brother-in-law, Thomas Weir, who was and is still my curate, took the entire charge of Marshmallows.

What led to this will soon appear. I will try to be minute enough in my narrative to make my story interesting, although it will cost me suffering to recall some of the incidents I have to narrate.

CHAPTER II.
CONSTANCE'S BIRTHDAY

Was it from observation of nature in its association with human nature, or from artistic feeling alone, that Shakspere so often represents Nature's mood as in harmony with the mood of the principal actors in his drama? I know I have so often found Nature's mood in harmony with my own, even when she had nothing to do with forming mine, that in looking back I have wondered at the fact. There may, however, be some self-deception about it. At all events, on the morning of my Constance's eighteenth birthday, a lovely October day with a golden east, clouds of golden foliage about the ways, and an air that seemed filled with the ether of an *aurum potabile*, there came yet an occasional blast of wind, which, without being absolutely cold, smelt of winter, and made one draw one's shoulders together with the sense of an unfriendly presence. I do not think Constance felt it at all, however, as she stood on the steps in her riding-habit, waiting till the horses made their appearance. It had somehow grown into a custom with us that each of the children, as his or her birthday came round, should be king or queen for that day, and, subject to the veto of father and mother, should have everything his or her own way. Let me say for them, however, that in the matter of choosing the dinner,

which of course was included in the royal prerogative, I came to see that it was almost invariably the favourite dishes of others of the family that were chosen, and not those especially agreeable to the royal palate. Members of families where children have not been taught from their earliest years that the great privilege of possession is the right to bestow, may regard this as an improbable assertion; but others will know that it might well enough be true, even if I did not say that so it was. But there was always the choice of some individual treat, which was determined solely by the preference of the individual in authority. Constance had chosen "a long ride with papa."

I suppose a parent may sometimes be right when he speaks with admiration of his own children. The probability of his being correct is to be determined by the amount of capacity he has for admiring other people's children. However this may be in my own case, I venture to assert that Constance did look very lovely that morning. She was fresh as the young day: we were early people—breakfast and prayers were over, and it was nine o'clock as she stood on the steps and I approached her from the lawn.

"O, papa! isn't it jolly?" she said merrily.

"Very jolly indeed, my dear," I answered, delighted to hear the word from the lips of my gentle daughter. She very seldom used a slang word, and when she did, she used it like a lady. Shall I tell you what she was like? Ah! you could not see her as I saw her that morning if I did. I will, however, try to give you a general idea, just in order that you and I should not be picturing to ourselves

two very different persons while I speak of her.

She was rather little, and so slight that she looked tall. I have often observed that the impression of height is an affair of proportion, and has nothing to do with feet and inches. She was rather fair in complexion, with her mother's blue eyes, and her mother's long dark wavy hair. She was generally playful, and took greater liberties with me than any of the others; only with her liberties, as with her slang, she knew instinctively when, where, and how much. For on the borders of her playfulness there seemed ever to hang a fringe of thoughtfulness, as if she felt that the present moment owed all its sparkle and brilliance to the eternal sunlight. And the appearance was not in the least a deceptive one. The eternal was not far from her—none the farther that she enjoyed life like a bird, that her laugh was merry, that her heart was careless, and that her voice rang through the house—a sweet soprano voice—singing snatches of songs (now a street tune she had caught from a London organ, now an air from Handel or Mozart), or that she would sometimes tease her elder sister about her solemn and anxious looks; for Wynnie, the eldest, had to suffer for her grandmother's sins against her daughter, and came into the world with a troubled little heart, that was soon compelled to flee for refuge to the rock that was higher than she. Ah! my Constance! But God was good to you and to us in you.

"Where shall we go, Connie?" I said, and the same moment the sound of the horses' hoofs reached us.

"Would it be too far to go to Addicehead?" she returned.

"It is a long ride," I answered.

"Too much for the pony?"

"O dear, no—not at all. I was thinking of you, not of the pony."

"I'm quite as able to ride as the pony is to carry me, papa. And I want to get something for Wynnie. Do let us go."

"Very well, my dear," I said, and raised her to the saddle—if I may say *raised*, for no bird ever hopped more lightly from one twig to another than she sprung from the ground on her pony's back.

In a moment I was beside her, and away we rode.

The shadows were still long, the dew still pearly on the spiders' webs, as we trotted out of our own grounds into a lane that led away towards the high road. Our horses were fresh and the air was exciting; so we turned from the hard road into the first suitable field, and had a gallop to begin with. Constance was a good horse-woman, for she had been used to the saddle longer than she could remember. She was now riding a tall well-bred pony, with plenty of life—rather too much, I sometimes thought, when I was out with Wynnie; but I never thought so when I was with Constance. Another field or two sufficiently quieted both animals—I did not want to have all our time taken up with their frolics—and then we began to talk.

"You are getting quite a woman now, Connie, my dear," I said.

"Quite an old grannie, papa," she answered.

"Old enough to think about what's coming next," I said

gravely.

"O, papa! And you are always telling us that we must not think about the morrow, or even the next hour. But, then, that's in the pulpit," she added, with a sly look up at me from under the drooping feather of her pretty hat.

"You know very well what I mean, you puss," I answered. "And I don't say one thing in the pulpit and another out of it."

She was at my horse's shoulder with a bound, as if Spry, her pony, had been of one mind and one piece with her. She was afraid she had offended me. She looked up into mine with as anxious a face as ever I saw upon Wynnie.

"O, thank you, papa!" she said when I smiled. "I thought I had been rude. I didn't mean it, indeed I didn't. But I do wish you would make it a little plainer to me. I do think about things sometimes, though you would hardly believe it."

"What do you want made plainer, my child?" I asked.

"When we're to think, and when we're not to think," she answered.

I remember all of this conversation because of what came so soon after.

"If the known duty of to-morrow depends on the work of to-day," I answered, "if it cannot be done right except you think about it and lay your plans for it, then that thought is to-day's business, not to-morrow's."

"Dear papa, some of your explanations are more difficult than the things themselves. May I be as impertinent as I like on my

birthday?" she asked suddenly, again looking up in my face.

We were walking now, and she had a hold of my horse's mane, so as to keep her pony close up.

"Yes, my dear, as impertinent as you like—not an atom more, mind."

"Well, papa, I sometimes wish you wouldn't explain things so much. I seem to understand you all the time you are preaching, but when I try the text afterwards by myself, I can't make anything of it, and I've forgotten every word you said about it."

"Perhaps that is because you have no right to understand it."

"I thought all Protestants had a right to understand every word of the Bible," she returned.

"If they can," I rejoined. "But last Sunday, for instance, I did not expect anybody there to understand a certain bit of my sermon, except your mamma and Thomas Weir."

"How funny! What part of it was that?"

"O! I'm not going to tell you. You have no right to understand it. But most likely you thought you understood it perfectly, and it appeared to you, in consequence, very commonplace."

"In consequence of what?"

"In consequence of your thinking you understood it."

"O, papa dear! you're getting worse and worse. It's not often I ask you anything—and on my birthday too! It is really too bad of you to bewilder my poor little brains in this way."

"I will try to make you see what I mean, my pet. No talk about an idea that you never had in your head at all, can make you have

that idea. If you had never seen a horse, no description even, not to say no amount of remark, would bring the figure of a horse before your mind. Much more is this the case with truths that belong to the convictions and feelings of the heart. Suppose a man had never in his life asked God for anything, or thanked God for anything, would his opinion as to what David meant in one of his worshipping psalms be worth much? The whole thing would be beyond him. If you have never known what it is to have care of any kind upon you, you cannot understand what our Lord means when he tells us to take no thought for the morrow."

"But indeed, papa, I am very full of care sometimes, though not perhaps about to-morrow precisely. But that does not matter, does it?"

"Certainly not. Tell me what you are full of care about, my child, and perhaps I can help you."

"You often say, papa, that half the misery in this world comes from idleness, and that you do not believe that in a world where God is at work every day, Sundays not excepted, it could have been intended that women any more than men should have nothing to do. Now what am I to do? What have I been sent into the world for? I don't see it; and I feel very useless and wrong sometimes."

"I do not think there is very much to complain of you in that respect, Connie. You, and your sister as well, help me very much in my parish. You take much off your mother's hands too. And you do a good deal for the poor. You teach your younger brothers

and sister, and meantime you are learning yourselves."

"Yes, but that's not work."

"It is work. And it is the work that is given you to do at present. And you would do it much better if you were to look at it in that light. Not that I have anything to complain of."

"But I don't want to stop at home and lead an easy, comfortable life, when there are so many to help everywhere in the world."

"Is there anything better in doing something where God has not placed you, than in doing it where he has placed you?"

"No, papa. But my sisters are quite enough for all you have for us to do at home. Is nobody ever to go away to find the work meant for her? You won't think, dear papa, that I want to get away from home, will you?"

"No, my dear. I believe that you are really thinking about duty. And now comes the moment for considering the passage to which you began by referring:—What God may hereafter require of you, you must not give yourself the least trouble about. Everything he gives you to do, you must do as well as ever you can, and that is the best possible preparation for what he may want you to do next. If people would but do what they have to do, they would always find themselves ready for what came next. And I do not believe that those who follow this rule are ever left floundering on the sea-deserted sands of inaction, unable to find water enough to swim in."

"Thank you, dear papa. That's a little sermon all to myself, and

I think I shall understand it even when I think about it afterwards. Now let's have a trot."

"There is one thing more I ought to speak about though, Connie. It is not your moral nature alone you ought to cultivate. You ought to make yourself as worth God's making as you possibly can. Now I am a little doubtful whether you keep up your studies at all."

She shrugged her pretty shoulders playfully, looking up in my face again.

"I don't like dry things, papa."

"Nobody does."

"Nobody!" she exclaimed. "How do the grammars and history-books come to be written then?"

In talking to me, somehow, the child always put on a more childish tone than when she talked to anyone else. I am certain there was no affection in it, though. Indeed, how could she be affected with her fault-finding old father?

"No. Those books are exceedingly interesting to the people that make them. Dry things are just things that you do not know enough about to care for them. And all you learn at school is next to nothing to what you have to learn."

"What must I do then?" she asked with a sigh. "Must I go all over my French Grammar again? O dear! I do hate it so!"

"If you will tell me something you like, Connie, instead of something you don't like, I may be able to give you advice. Is there nothing you are fond of?" I continued, finding that she

remained silent.

"I don't know anything in particular—that is, I don't know anything in the way of school-work that I really liked. I don't mean that I didn't try to do what I had to do, for I did. There was just one thing I liked—the poetry we had to learn once a week. But I suppose gentlemen count that silly—don't they?"

"On the contrary, my dear, I would make that liking of yours the foundation of all your work. Besides, I think poetry the grandest thing God has given us—though perhaps you and I might not quite agree about what poetry was poetry enough to be counted an especial gift of God. Now, what poetry do you like best?"

"Mrs. Hemans's, I think, papa."

"Well, very well, to begin with. 'There is,' as Mr. Carlyle said to a friend of mine—'There is a thin vein of true poetry in Mrs. Hemans.' But it is time you had done with thin things, however good they may be. Most people never get beyond spoon-meat—in this world, at least, and they expect nothing else in the world to come. I must take you in hand myself, and see what I can do for you. It is wretched to see capable enough creatures, all for want of a little guidance, bursting with admiration of what owes its principal charm to novelty of form, gained at the cost of expression and sense. Not that that applies to Mrs. Hemans. She is simple enough, only diluted to a degree. But I hold that whatever mental food you take should be just a little too strong for you. That implies trouble, necessitates growth, and involves

delight."

"I sha'n't mind how difficult it is if you help me, papa. But it is anything but satisfactory to go groping on without knowing what you are about."

I ought to have mentioned that Constance had been at school for two years, and had only been home a month that very day, in order to account for my knowing so little about her tastes and habits of mind. We went on talking a little more in the same way, and if I were writing for young people only, I should be tempted to go on a little farther with the account of what we said to each other; for it might help some of them to see that the thing they like best should, circumstances and conscience permitting, be made the centre from which they start to learn; that they should go on enlarging their knowledge all round from that one point at which God intended them to begin. But at length we fell into a silence, a very happy one on my part; for I was more than delighted to find that this one too of my children was following after the truth—wanting to do what was right, namely, to obey the word of the Lord, whether openly spoken to all, or to herself in the voice of her own conscience and the light of that understanding which is the candle of the Lord. I had often said to myself in past years, when I had found myself in the company of young ladies who announced their opinions—probably of no deeper origin than the prejudices of their nurses—as if these distinguished them from all the world besides; who were profound upon passion and ignorant of grace; who had not

a notion whether a dress was beautiful, but only whether it was of the newest cut—I had often said to myself: "What shall I do if my daughters come to talk and think like that—if thinking it can be called?" but being confident that instruction for which the mind is not prepared only lies in a rotting heap, producing all kinds of mental evils correspondent to the results of successive loads of food which the system cannot assimilate, my hope had been to rouse wise questions in the minds of my children, in place of overwhelming their digestions with what could be of no instruction or edification without the foregoing appetite. Now my Constance had begun to ask me questions, and it made me very happy. We had thus come a long way nearer to each other; for however near the affection of human animals may bring them, there are abysses between soul and soul—the souls even of father and daughter—over which they must pass to meet. And I do not believe that any two human beings alive know yet what it is to love as love is in the glorious will of the Father of lights.

I linger on with my talk, for I shrink from what I must relate.

We were going at a gentle trot, silent, along a woodland path—a brown, soft, shady road, nearly five miles from home, our horses scattering about the withered leaves that lay thick upon it. A good deal of underwood and a few large trees had been lately cleared from the place. There were many piles of fagots about, and a great log lying here and there along the side of the path. One of these, when a tree, had been struck by lightning, and had stood till the frosts and rains had bared it of its bark. Now it lay

white as a skeleton by the side of the path, and was, I think, the cause of what followed. All at once my daughter's pony sprang to the other side of the road, shying sideways; unsettled her so, I presume; then rearing and plunging, threw her from the saddle across one of the logs of which I have spoken. I was by her side in a moment. To my horror she lay motionless. Her eyes were closed, and when I took her up in my arms she did not open them. I laid her on the moss, and got some water and sprinkled her face. Then she revived a little; but seemed in much pain, and all at once went off into another faint. I was in terrible perplexity.

Presently a man who, having been cutting fagots at a little distance, had seen the pony careering through the wood, came up and asked what he could do to help me. I told him to take my horse, whose bridle I had thrown over the latch of a gate, and ride to Oldcastle Hall, and ask Mrs. Walton to come with the carriage as quickly as possible. "Tell her," I said, "that her daughter has had a fall from her pony, and is rather shaken. Ride as hard as you can go."

The man was off in a moment; and there I sat watching my poor child, for what seemed to be a dreadfully long time before the carriage arrived. She had come to herself quite, but complained of much pain in her back; and, to my distress, I found that she could not move herself enough to make the least change of her position. She evidently tried to keep up as well as she could; but her face expressed great suffering: it was dreadfully pale, and looked worn with a month's illness. All my fear was

for her spine.

At length I caught sight of the carriage, coming through the wood as fast as the road would allow, with the woodman on the box, directing the coachman. It drew up, and my wife got out. She was as pale as Constance, but quiet and firm, her features composed almost to determination. I had never seen her look like that before. She asked no questions: there was time enough for that afterwards. She had brought plenty of cushions and pillows, and we did all we could to make an easy couch for the poor girl; but she moaned dreadfully as we lifted her into the carriage. We did our best to keep her from being shaken; but those few miles were the longest journey I ever made in my life.

When we reached home at length, we found that Ethel, or, as we commonly called her, using the other end of her name, Wynnie—for she was named after her mother—had got a room on the ground-floor, usually given to visitors, ready for her sister; and we were glad indeed not to have to carry her up the stairs. Before my wife left, she had sent the groom off to Addicehead for both physician and surgeon. A young man who had settled at Marshmallows as general practitioner a year or two before, was waiting for us when we arrived. He helped us to lay her upon a mattress in the position in which she felt the least pain. But why should I linger over the sorrowful detail? All agreed that the poor child's spine was seriously injured, and that probably years of suffering were before her. Everything was done that could be done; but she was not moved from that room for nine months,

during which, though her pain certainly grew less by degrees, her want of power to move herself remained almost the same.

When I had left her at last a little composed, with her mother seated by her bedside, I called my other two daughters—Wynnie, the eldest, and Dorothy, the youngest, whom I found seated on the floor outside, one on each side of the door, weeping—into my study, and said to them: "My darlings, this is very sad; but you must remember that it is God's will; and as you would both try to bear it cheerfully if it had fallen to your lot to bear, you must try to be cheerful even when it is your sister's part to endure."

"O, papa! poor Connie!" cried Dora, and burst into fresh tears.

Wynnie said nothing, but knelt down by my knee, and laid her cheek upon it.

"Shall I tell you what Constance said to me just before I left the room?" I asked.

"Please do, papa."

"She whispered, 'You must try to bear it, all of you, as well as you can. I don't mind it very much, only for you.' So, you see, if you want to make her comfortable, you must not look gloomy and troubled. Sick people like to see cheerful faces about them; and I am sure Connie will not suffer nearly so much if she finds that she does not make the household gloomy."

This I had learned from being ill myself once or twice since my marriage. My wife never came near me with a gloomy face, and I had found that it was quite possible to be sympathetic with those of my flock who were ill without putting on a long face

when I went to see them. Of course, I do not mean that I could, or that it was desirable that I should, look cheerful when any were in great pain or mental distress. But in ordinary conditions of illness a cheerful countenance is as a message of *all's well*, which may surely be carried into a sick chamber by the man who believes that the heart of a loving Father is at the centre of things, that he is light all about the darkness, and that he will not only bring good out of evil at last, but will be with the sufferer all the time, making endurance possible, and pain tolerable. There are a thousand alleviations that people do not often think of, coming from God himself. Would you not say, for instance, that time must pass very slowly in pain? But have you never observed, or has no one ever made the remark to you, how strangely fast, even in severe pain, the time passes after all?

"We will do all we can, will we not," I went on, "to make her as comfortable as possible? You, Dora, must attend to your little brothers, that your mother may not have too much to think about now that she will have Connie to nurse."

They could not say much, but they both kissed me, and went away leaving me to understand clearly enough that they had quite understood me. I then returned to the sick chamber, where I found that the poor child had fallen asleep.

My wife and I watched by her bedside on alternate nights, until the pain had so far subsided, and the fever was so far reduced, that we could allow Wynnie to take a share in the office. We could not think of giving her over to the care of any but one

of ourselves during the night. Her chief suffering came from its being necessary that she should keep nearly one position on her back, because of her spine, while the external bruise and the swelling of the muscles were in consequence so painful, that it needed all that mechanical contrivance could do to render the position endurable. But these outward conditions were greatly ameliorated before many days were over.

This is a dreary beginning of my story, is it not? But sickness of all kinds is such a common thing in the world, that it is well sometimes to let our minds rest upon it, lest it should take us altogether at unawares, either in ourselves or our friends, when it comes. If it were not a good thing in the end, surely it would not be; and perhaps before I have done my readers will not be sorry that my tale began so gloomily. The sickness in Judaea eighteen hundred and thirty-five years ago, or thereabouts, has no small part in the story of him who came to put all things under our feet. Praise be to him for evermore!

It soon became evident to me that that room was like a new and more sacred heart to the house. At first it radiated gloom to the remotest corners; but soon rays of light began to appear mingling with the gloom. I could see that bits of news were carried from it to the servants in the kitchen, in the garden, in the stable, and over the way to the home-farm. Even in the village, and everywhere over the parish, I was received more kindly, and listened to more willingly, because of the trouble I and my family were in; while in the house, although we had never been

anything else than a loving family, it was easy to discover that we all drew more closely together in consequence of our common anxiety. Previous to this, it had been no unusual thing to see Wynnie and Dora impatient with each other; for Dora was none the less a wild, somewhat lawless child, that she was a profoundly affectionate one. She rather resembled her cousin Judy, in fact —whom she called Aunt Judy, and with whom she was naturally a great favourite. Wynnie, on the other hand, was sedate, and rather severe—more severe, I must in justice say, with herself than with anyone else. I had sometimes wished, it is true, that her mother, in regard to the younger children, were more like her; but there I was wrong. For one of the great goods that come of having two parents, is that the one balances and rectifies the motions of the other. No one is good but God. No one holds the truth, or can hold it, in one and the same thought, but God. Our human life is often, at best, but an oscillation between the extremes which together make the truth; and it is not a bad thing in a family, that the pendulums of father and mother should differ in movement so far, that when the one is at one extremity of the swing, the other should be at the other, so that they meet only in the point of *indifference*, in the middle; that the predominant tendency of the one should not be the predominant tendency of the other. I was a very strict disciplinarian—too much so, perhaps, sometimes: Ethelwyn, on the other hand, was too much inclined, I thought, to excuse everything. I was law, she was grace. But grace often yielded to law, and law sometimes yielded to grace. Yet she

represented the higher; for in the ultimate triumph of grace, in the glad performance of the command from love of what is commanded, the law is fulfilled: the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. I must say this for myself, however, that, although obedience was the one thing I enforced, believing it the one thing upon which all family economy primarily depends, yet my object always was to set my children free from my law as soon as possible; in a word, to help them to become, as soon as it might be, a law unto themselves. Then they would need no more of mine. Then I would go entirely over to the mother's higher side, and become to them, as much as in me lay, no longer law and truth, but grace and truth. But to return to my children—it was soon evident not only that Wynnie had grown more indulgent to Dora's vagaries, but that Dora was more submissive to Wynnie, while the younger children began to obey their eldest sister with a willing obedience, keeping down their effervescence within doors, and letting it off only out of doors, or in the out-houses.

When Constance began to recover a little, then the sacredness of that chamber began to show itself more powerfully, radiating on all sides a yet stronger influence of peace and goodwill. It was like a fountain of gentle light, quieting and bringing more or less into tune all that came within the circle of its sweetness. This brings me to speak again of my lovely child. For surely a father may speak thus of a child of God. He cannot regard his child as his even as a book he has written may be his. A man's child is his because God has said to him, "Take this child and nurse

it for me." She is God's making; God's marvellous invention, to be tended and cared for, and ministered unto as one of his precious things; a young angel, let me say, who needs the air of this lower world to make her wings grow. And while he regards her thus, he will see all other children in the same light, and will not dare to set up his own against others of God's brood with the new-budding wings. The universal heart of truth will thus rectify, while it intensifies, the individual feeling towards one's own; and the man who is most free from poor partisanship in regard to his own family, will feel the most individual tenderness for the lovely human creatures whom God has given into his own especial care and responsibility. Show me the man who is tender, reverential, gracious towards the children of other men, and I will show you the man who will love and tend his own best, to whose heart his own will flee for their first refuge after God, when they catch sight of the cloud in the wind.

CHAPTER III.
THE SICK CHAMBER

In the course of a month there was a good deal more of light in the smile with which my darling greeted me when I entered her room in the morning. Her pain was greatly gone, but the power of moving her limbs had not yet even begun to show itself.

One day she received me with a still happier smile than I had yet seen upon her face, put out her thin white hand, took mine and kissed it, and said, "Papa," with a lingering on the last syllable.

"What is it, my pet?" I asked.

"I am so happy!"

"What makes you so happy?" I asked again.

"I don't know," she answered. "I haven't thought about it yet. But everything looks so pleasant round me. Is it nearly winter yet, papa? I've forgotten all about how the time has been going."

"It is almost winter, my dear. There is hardly a leaf left on the trees—just two or three disconsolate yellow ones that want to get away down to the rest. They go fluttering and fluttering and trying to break away, but they can't."

"That is just as I felt a little while ago. I wanted to die and get away, papa; for I thought I should never be well again, and I should be in everybody's way.—I am afraid I shall not get well,

after all," she added, and the light clouded on her sweet face.

"Well, my darling, we are in God's hands. We shall never get tired of you, and you must not get tired of us. Would you get tired of nursing me, if I were ill?"

"O, papa!" And the tears began to gather in her eyes.

"Then you must think we are not able to love so well as you."

"I know what you mean. I did not think of it that way. I will never think so about it again. I was only thinking how useless I was."

"There you are quite mistaken, my dear. No living creature ever was useless. You've got plenty to do there."

"But what have I got to do? I don't feel able for anything," she said; and again the tears came in her eyes, as if I had been telling her to get up and she could not.

"A great deal of our work," I answered, "we do without knowing what it is. But I'll tell you what you have got to do: you have got to believe in God, and in everybody in this house."

"I do, I do. But that is easy to do," she returned.

"And do you think that the work God gives us to do is never easy? Jesus says his yoke is easy, his burden is light. People sometimes refuse to do God's work just because it is easy. This is, sometimes, because they cannot believe that easy work is his work; but there may be a very bad pride in it: it may be because they think that there is little or no honour to be got in that way; and therefore they despise it. Some again accept it with half a heart, and do it with half a hand. But, however easy any work

may be, it cannot be well done without taking thought about it. And such people, instead of taking thought about their work, generally take thought about the morrow, in which no work can be done any more than in yesterday. The Holy Present!—I think I must make one more sermon about it—although you, Connie," I said, meaning it for a little joke, "do think that I have said too much about it already."

"Papa, papa! do forgive me. This is a judgment on me for talking to you as I did that dreadful morning. But I was so happy that I was impertinent."

"You silly darling!" I said. "A judgment! God be angry with you for that! Even if it had been anything wrong, which it was not, do you think God has no patience? No, Connie. I will tell you what seems to me much more likely. You wanted something to do; and so God gave you something to do."

"Lying in bed and doing nothing!"

"Yes. Just lying in bed, and doing his will."

"If I could but feel that I was doing his will!"

"When you do it, then you will feel you are doing it."

"I know you are coming to something, papa. Please make haste, for my back is getting so bad."

"I've tired you, my pet. It was very thoughtless of me. I will tell you the rest another time," I said, rising.

"No, no. It will make me much worse not to hear it all now."

"Well, I will tell you. Be still, my darling, I won't be long. In the time of the old sacrifices, when God so kindly told his

ignorant children to do something for him in that way, poor people were told to bring, not a bullock or a sheep, for that was more than they could get, but a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. But now, as Crashaw the poet says, 'Ourselves become our own best sacrifice.' God wanted to teach people to offer themselves. Now, you are poor, my pet, and you cannot offer yourself in great things done for your fellow-men, which was the way Jesus did. But you must remember that the two young pigeons of the poor were just as acceptable to God as the fat bullock of the rich. Therefore you must say to God something like this:—'O heavenly Father, I have nothing to offer thee but my patience. I will bear thy will, and so offer my will a burnt-offering unto thee. I will be as useless as thou pleasest.' Depend upon it, my darling, in the midst of all the science about the world and its ways, and all the ignorance of God and his greatness, the man or woman who can thus say, *Thy will be done*, with the true heart of giving up is nearer the secret of things than the geologist and theologian. And now, my darling, be quiet in God's name."

She held up her mouth to kiss me, but did not speak, and I left her, and sent Dora to sit with her.

In the evening, when I went into her room again, having been out in my parish all the morning, I began to unload my budget of small events. Indeed, we all came in like pelicans with stuffed pouches to empty them in her room, as if she had been the only young one we had, and we must cram her with news. Or, rather, she was like the queen of the commonwealth sending out her

messages into all parts, and receiving messages in return. I might call her the brain of the house; but I have used similes enough for a while.

After I had done talking, she said—

"And you have been to the school too, papa?"

"Yes. I go to the school almost every day. I fancy in such a school as ours the young people get more good than they do in church. You know I had made a great change in the Sunday-school just before you came home."

"I heard of that, papa. You won't let any of the little ones go to school on the Sunday."

"No. It is too much for them. And having made this change, I feel the necessity of being in the school myself nearly every day, that I may do something direct for the little ones."

"And you'll have to take me up soon, as you promised, you know, papa—just before Sprite threw me."

"As soon as you like, my dear, after you are able to read again."

"O, you must begin before that, please.—You could spare time to read a little to me, couldn't you?" she said doubtfully, as if she feared she was asking too much.

"Certainly, my dear; and I will begin to think about it at once."

It was in part the result of this wish of my child's that it became the custom to gather in her room on Sunday evenings. She was quite unable for any kind of work such as she would have had me commence with her, but I used to take something to read to her

every now and then, and always after our early tea on Sundays.

What a thing it is to have one to speak and think about and try to find out and understand, who is always and altogether and perfectly good! Such a centre that is for all our thoughts and words and actions and imaginations! It is indeed blessed to be human beings with Jesus Christ for the centre of humanity.

In the papers wherein I am about to record the chief events of the following years of my life, I shall give a short account of what passed at some of these assemblies in my child's room, in the hope that it may give my friends something, if not new, yet fresh to think about. For God has so made us that everyone who thinks at all thinks in a way that must be more or less fresh to everyone else who thinks, if he only have the gift of setting forth his thoughts so that we can see what they are.

I hope my readers will not be alarmed at this, and suppose that I am about to inflict long sermons upon them. I am not. I do hope, as I say, to teach them something; but those whom I succeed in so teaching will share in the delight it will give me to write about what I love most.

As far as I can remember, I will tell how this Sunday-evening class began. I was sitting by Constance's bed. The fire was burning brightly, and the twilight had deepened so nearly into night that it was reflected back from the window, for the curtains had not yet been drawn. There was no light in the room but that of the fire.

Now Constance was in the way of asking often what kind of

day or night it was, for there never was a girl more a child of nature than she. Her heart seemed to respond at once to any and every mood of the world around her. To her the condition of air, earth, and sky was news, and news of poetic interest too. "What is it like?" she would often say, without any more definite shaping of the question. This same evening she said:

"What is it like, papa?"

"It is growing dark," I answered, "as you can see. It is a still evening, and what they call a black frost. The trees are standing as still as if they were carved out of stone, and would snap off everywhere if the wind were to blow. The ground is dark, and as hard as if it were of cast iron. A gloomy night rather, my dear. It looks as if there were something upon its mind that made it sullenly thoughtful; but the stars are coming out one after another overhead, and the sky will be all awake soon. A strange thing the life that goes on all night, is it not? The life of owlets, and mice, and beasts of prey, and bats, and stars," I said, with no very categorical arrangement, "and dreams, and flowers that don't go to sleep like the rest, but send out their scent all night long. Only those are gone now. There are no scents abroad, not even of the earth in such a frost as this."

"Don't you think it looks sometimes, papa, as if God turned his back on the world, or went farther away from it for a while?"

"Tell me a little more what you mean, Connie."

"Well, this night now, this dark, frozen, lifeless night, which you have been describing to me, isn't like God at all—is it?"

"No, it is not. I see what you mean now."

"It is just as if he had gone away and said, 'Now you shall see what you can do without me.'

"Something like that. But do you know that English people—at least I think so—enjoy the changeful weather of their country much more upon the whole than those who have fine weather constantly? You see it is not enough to satisfy God's goodness that he should give us all things richly to enjoy, but he must make us able to enjoy them as richly as he gives them. He has to consider not only the gift, but the receiver of the gift. He has to make us able to take the gift and make it our own, as well as to give us the gift. In fact, it is not real giving, with the full, that is, the divine, meaning of giving, without it. He has to give us to the gift as well as give the gift to us. Now for this, a break, an interruption is good, is invaluable, for then we begin to think about the thing, and do something in the matter ourselves. The wonder of God's teaching is that, in great part, he makes us not merely learn, but teach ourselves, and that is far grander than if he only made our minds as he makes our bodies."

"I think I understand you, papa. For since I have been ill, you would wonder, if you could see into me, how even what you tell me about the world out of doors gives me more pleasure than I think I ever had when I could go about in it just as I liked."

"It wouldn't do that, though, you know, if you hadn't had the other first. The pleasure you have comes as much from your memory as from my news."

"I see that, papa."

"Now can you tell me anything in history that confirms what I have been saying?"

"I don't know anything about history, papa. The only thing that comes into my head is what you were saying yourself the other day about Milton's blindness."

"Ah, yes. I had not thought of that. Do you know, I do believe that God wanted a grand poem from that man, and therefore blinded him that he might be able to write it. But he had first trained him up to the point—given him thirty years in which he had not to provide the bread of a single day, only to learn and think; then set him to teach boys; then placed him at Cromwell's side, in the midst of the tumultuous movement of public affairs, into which the late student entered with all his heart and soul; and then last of all he cast the veil of a divine darkness over him, sent him into a chamber far more retired than that in which he laboured at Cambridge, and set him like the nightingale to sing darkling. The blackness about him was just the great canvas which God gave him to cover with forms of light and music. Deep wells of memory burst upwards from below; the windows of heaven were opened from above; from both rushed the deluge of song which flooded his soul, and which he has poured out in a great river to us."

"It was rather hard for poor Milton, though, wasn't it, papa?"

"Wait till he says so, my dear. We are sometimes too ready with our sympathy, and think things a great deal worse than those

who have to undergo them. Who would not be glad to be struck with *such* blindness as Milton's?"

"Those that do not care about his poetry, papa," answered Constance, with a deprecatory smile.

"Well said, my Connie. And to such it never can come. But, if it please God, you will love Milton before you are about again. You can't love one you know nothing about."

"I have tried to read him a little."

"Yes, I daresay. You might as well talk of liking a man whose face you had never seen, because you did not approve of the back of his coat. But you and Milton together have led me away from a far grander instance of what we had been talking about. Are you tired, darling?"

"Not the least, papa. You don't mind what I said about Milton?"

"Not at all, my dear. I like your honesty. But I should mind very much if you thought, with your ignorance of Milton, that your judgment of him was more likely to be right than mine, with my knowledge of him."

"O, papa! I am only sorry that I am not capable of appreciating him."

"There you are wrong again. I think you are quite capable of appreciating him. But you cannot appreciate what you have never seen. You think of him as dry, and think you ought to be able to like dry things. Now he is not dry, and you ought not to be able to like dry things. You have a figure before you in your fancy, which

is dry, and which you call Milton. But it is no more Milton than your dull-faced Dutch doll, which you called after her, was your merry Aunt Judy. But here comes your mamma; and I haven't said what I wanted to say yet."

"But surely, husband, you can say it all the same," said my wife. "I will go away if you can't."

"I can say it all the better, my love. Come and sit down here beside me. I was trying to show Connie—"

"You did show me, papa."

"Well, I was showing Connie that a gift has sometimes to be taken away again before we can know what it is worth, and so receive it right."

Ethelwyn sighed. She was always more open to the mournful than the glad. Her heart had been dreadfully wrung in her youth.

"And I was going on to give her the greatest instance of it in human history. As long as our Lord was with his disciples, they could not see him right: he was too near them. Too much light, too many words, too much revelation, blinds or stupefies. The Lord had been with them long enough. They loved him dearly, and yet often forgot his words almost as soon as he said them. He could not get it into them, for instance, that he had not come to be a king. Whatever he said, they shaped it over again after their own fancy; and their minds were so full of their own worldly notions of grandeur and command, that they could not receive into their souls the gift of God present before their eyes. Therefore he was taken away, that his Spirit, which was more himself than his

bodily presence, might come into them—that they might receive the gift of God into their innermost being. After he had gone out of their sight, and they might look all around and down in the grave and up in the air, and not see him anywhere—when they thought they had lost him, he began to come to them again from the other side—from the inside. They found that the image of him which his presence with them had printed in light upon their souls, began to revive in the dark of his absence; and not that only, but that in looking at it without the overwhelming of his bodily presence, lines and forms and meanings began to dawn out of it which they had never seen before. And his words came back to them, no longer as they had received them, but as he meant them. The spirit of Christ filling their hearts and giving them new power, made them remember, by making them able to understand, all that he had said to them. They were then always saying to each other, 'You remember how;' whereas before, they had been always staring at each other with astonishment and something very near incredulity, while he spoke to them. So that after he had gone away, he was really nearer to them than he had been before. The meaning of anything is more than its visible presence. There is a soul in everything, and that soul is the meaning of it. The soul of the world and all its beauty has come nearer to you, my dear, just because you are separated from it for a time."

"Thank you, dear papa. I do like to get a little sermon all to myself now and then. That is another good of being ill."

"You don't mean me to have a share in it, then, Connie, do you?" said my wife, smiling at her daughter's pleasure.

"O, mamma! I should have thought you knew all papa had got to say by this time. I daresay he has given you a thousand sermons all to yourself."

"Then you suppose, Connie, that I came into the world with just a boxful of sermons, and after I had taken them all out there were no more. I should be sorry to think I should not have a good many new things to say by this time next year."

"Well, papa, I wish I could be sure of knowing more next year."

"Most people do learn, whether they will or not. But the kind of learning is very different in the two cases."

"But I want to ask you one question, papa: do you think that we should not know Jesus better now if he were to come and let us see him—as he came to the disciples so long, long ago? I wish it were not so long ago."

"As to the time, it makes no difference whether it was last year or two thousand years ago. The whole question is how much we understand, and understanding, obey him. And I do not think we should be any nearer that if he came amongst us bodily again. If we should, he would come. I believe we should be further off it."

"Do you think, then," said Connie, in an almost despairing tone, as if I were the prophet of great evil, "that we shall never, never, never see him?"

"That is *quite* another thing, my Connie. That is the heart of

my hopes by day and my dreams by night. To behold the face of Jesus seems to me the one thing to be desired. I do not know that it is to be prayed for; but I think it will be given us as the great bounty of God, so soon as ever we are capable of it. That sight of the face of Jesus is, I think, what is meant by his glorious appearing, but it will come as a consequence of his spirit in us, not as a cause of that spirit in us. The pure in heart shall see God. The seeing of him will be the sign that we are like him, for only by being like him can we see him as he is. All the time that he was with them, the disciples never saw him as he was. You must understand a man before you can see and read his face aright; and as the disciples did not understand our Lord's heart, they could neither see nor read his face aright. But when we shall be fit to look that man in the face, God only knows."

"Then do you think, papa, that we, who have never seen him, could know him better than the disciples? I don't mean, of course, better than they knew him after he was taken away from them, but better than they knew him while he was still with them?"

"Certainly I do, my dear."

"O, papa! Is it possible? Why don't we all, then?"

"Because we won't take the trouble; that is the reason."

"O, what a grand thing to think! That would be worth living —worth being ill for. But how? how? Can't you help me? Mayn't one human being help another?"

"It is the highest duty one human being owes to another. But

whoever wants to learn must pray, and think, and, above all, obey —that is simply, do what Jesus says."

There followed a little silence, and I could hear my child sobbing. And the tears stood in; my wife's eyes—tears of gladness to hear her daughter's sobs.

"I will try, papa," Constance said at last. "But you *will* help me?"

"That I will, my love. I will help you in the best way I know; by trying to tell you what I have heard and learned about him—heard and learned of the Father, I hope and trust. It is coming near to the time when he was born;—but I have spoken quite as long as you are able to bear to-night."

"No, no, papa. Do go on."

"No, my dear; no more to-night. That would be to offend against the very truth I have been trying to set forth to you. But next Sunday—you have plenty to think about till then—I will talk to you about the baby Jesus; and perhaps I may find something more to help you by that time, besides what I have got to say now."

"But," said my wife, "don't you think, Connie, this is too good to keep all to ourselves? Don't you think we ought to have Wynnie and Dora in?"

"Yes, yes, mamma. Do let us have them in. And Harry and Charlie too."

"I fear they are rather young yet," I said. "Perhaps it might do them harm."

"It would be all the better for us to have them anyhow," said Ethelwyn, smiling.

"How do you mean, my dear?"

"Because you will say things more simply if you have them by you. Besides, you always say such things to children as delight grown people, though they could never get them out of you."

It was a wife's speech, reader. Forgive me for writing it.

"Well," I said, "I don't mind them coming in, but I don't promise to say anything directly to them. And you must let them go away the moment they wish it."

"Certainly," answered my wife; and so the matter was arranged.

CHAPTER IV.
A SUNDAY EVENING

When I went in to see Constance the next Sunday morning before going to church, I knew by her face that she was expecting the evening. I took care to get into no conversation with her during the day, that she might be quite fresh. In the evening, when I went into her room again with my Bible in my hand, I found all our little company assembled. There was a glorious fire, for it was very cold, and the little ones were seated on the rug before it, one on each side of their mother; Wynnie sat by the further side of the bed, for she always avoided any place or thing she thought another might like; and Dora sat by the further chimney-corner, leaving the space between the fire and my chair open that I might see and share the glow.

"The wind is very high, papa," said Constance, as I seated myself beside her.

"Yes, my dear. It has been blowing all day, and since sundown it has blown harder. Do you like the wind, Connie?"

"I am afraid I do like it. When it roars like that in the chimneys, and shakes the windows with a great rush as if it *would* get into the house and tear us to pieces, and then goes moaning away into the woods and grumbles about in them till it grows savage again, and rushes up at us with fresh fury, I am afraid I delight in it. I

feel so safe in the very jaws of danger."

"Why, you are quite poetic, Connie," said Wynnie.

"Don't laugh at me, Wynnie. Mind I'm an invalid, and I can't bear to be laughed at," returned Connie, half laughing herself, and a little more than a quarter crying.

Wynnie rose and kissed her, whispered something to her which made her laugh outright, and then sat down again.

"But tell me, Connie," I said, "why you are *afraid* you enjoy hearing the wind about the house."

"Because it must be so dreadful for those that are out in it."

"Perhaps not quite so bad as we think. You must not suppose that God has forgotten them, or cares less for them than for you because they are out in the wind."

"But if we thought like that, papa," said Wynnie, "shouldn't we come to feel that their sufferings were none of our business?"

"If our benevolence rests on the belief that God is less loving than we, it will come to a bad end somehow before long, Wynnie."

"Of course, I could not think that," she returned.

"Then your kindness would be such that you dared not, in God's name, think hopefully for those you could not help, lest you should, believing in his kindness, cease to help those whom you could help! Either God intended that there should be poverty and suffering, or he did not. If he did not intend it—for similar reasons to those for which he allows all sorts of evils—then there is nothing between but that we should sell everything that we

have and give it away to the poor."

"Then why don't we?" said Wynnie, looking truth itself in my face.

"Because that is not God's way, and we should do no end of harm by so doing. We should make so many more of those who will not help themselves who will not be set free from themselves by rising above themselves. We are not to gratify our own benevolence at the expense of its object—not to save our own souls as we fancy, by putting other souls into more danger than God meant for them."

"It sounds hard doctrine from your lips, papa," said Wynnie.

"Many things will look hard in so many words, which yet will be found kindness itself when they are interpreted by a higher theory. If the one thing is to let people have everything they want, then of course everyone ought to be rich. I have no doubt such a man as we were reading of in the papers the other day, who saw his servant girl drown without making the least effort to save her, and then bemoaned the loss of her labour for the coming harvest, thinking himself ill-used in her death, would hug his own selfishness on hearing my words, and say, 'All right, parson! Every man for himself! I made my own money, and they may make theirs!' *You* know that is not exactly the way I should think or act with regard to my neighbour. But if it were only that I have seen such noble characters cast in the mould of poverty, I should be compelled to regard poverty as one of God's powers in the world for raising the children of the kingdom, and to believe

that it was not because it could not be helped that our Lord said, 'The poor ye have always with you.' But what I wanted to say was, that there can be no reason why Connie should not enjoy what God has given her, although he has not thought fit to give as much to everybody; and above all, that we shall not help those right whom God gives us to help, if we do not believe that God is caring for every one of them as much as he is caring for every one of us. There was once a baby born in a stable, because his poor mother could get no room in a decent house. Where she lay I can hardly think. They must have made a bed of hay and straw for her in the stall, for we know the baby's cradle was the manger. Had God forsaken them? or would they not have been more *comfortable*, if that was the main thing, somewhere else? Ah! if the disciples, who were being born about the same time of fisher-fathers and cottage-mothers, to get ready for him to call and teach by the time he should be thirty years of age—if they had only been old enough, and had known that he was coming—would they not have got everything ready for him? They would have clubbed their little savings together, and worked day and night, and some rich women would have helped them, and they would have dressed the baby in fine linen, and got him the richest room their money would get, and they would have made the gold that the wise men brought into a crown for his little head, and would have burnt the frankincense before him. And so our little manger-baby would have been taken away from us. No more the stable-born Saviour—no more the poor Son of God born for us

all, as strong, as noble, as loving, as worshipful, as beautiful as he was poor! And we should not have learned that God does not care for money; that if he does not give more of it it is not that it is scarce with him, or that he is unkind, but that he does not value it himself. And if he sent his own son to be not merely brought up in the house of the carpenter of a little village, but to be born in the stable of a village inn, we need not suppose because a man sleeps under a haystack and is put in prison for it next day, that God does not care for him."

"But why did Jesus come so poor, papa?"

"That he might be just a human baby. That he might not be distinguished by this or by that accident of birth; that he might have nothing but a mother's love to welcome him, and so belong to everybody; that from the first he might show that the kingdom of God and the favour of God lie not in these external things at all—that the poorest little one, born in the meanest dwelling, or in none at all, is as much God's own and God's care as if he came in a royal chamber with colour and shine all about him. Had Jesus come amongst the rich, riches would have been more worshipped than ever. See how so many that count themselves good Christians honour possession and family and social rank, and I doubt hardly get rid of them when they are all swept away from them. The furthest most of such reach is to count Jesus an exception, and therefore not despise him. See how, even in the services of the church, as they call them, they will accumulate gorgeousness and cost. Had I my way, though I will never seek to

rouse men's thoughts about such external things, I would never have any vessel used in the eucharist but wooden platters and wooden cups."

"But are we not to serve him with our best?" said my wife.

"Yes, with our very hearts and souls, with our wills, with our absolute being. But all external things should be in harmony with the spirit of his revelation. And if God chose that his Son should visit the earth in homely fashion, in homely fashion likewise should be everything that enforces and commemorates that revelation. All church-forms should be on the other side from show and expense. Let the money go to build decent houses for God's poor, not to give them his holy bread and wine out of silver and gold and precious stones—stealing from the significance of the *content* by the meretricious grandeur of the *continent*. I would send all the church-plate to fight the devil with his own weapons in our overcrowded cities, and in our villages where the husbandmen are housed like swine, by giving them room to be clean and decent air from heaven to breathe. When the people find the clergy thus in earnest, they will follow them fast enough, and the money will come in like salt and oil upon the sacrifice. I would there were a few of our dignitaries that could think grandly about things, even as Jesus thought—even as God thought when he sent him. There are many of them willing to stand any amount of persecution about trifles: the same enthusiasm directed by high thoughts about the kingdom of heaven as within men and not around them, would redeem a vast region from that indifference

which comes of judging the gospel of God by the church of Christ with its phylacteries and hems."

"There is one thing," said Wynnie, after a pause, "that I have often thought about—why it was necessary for Jesus to come as a baby: he could not do anything for so long."

"First, I would answer, Wynnie, that if you would tell me why it is necessary for all of us to come as babies, it would be less necessary for me to tell you why he came so: whatever was human must be his. But I would say next, Are you sure that he could not do anything for so long? Does a baby do nothing? Ask mamma there. Is it for nothing that the mother lifts up such heartfuls of thanks to God for the baby on her knee? Is it nothing that the baby opens such fountains of love in almost all the hearts around? Ah! you do not think how much every baby has to do with the saving of the world—the saving of it from selfishness, and folly, and greed. And for Jesus, was he not going to establish the reign of love in the earth? How could he do better than begin from babyhood? He had to lay hold of the heart of the world. How could he do better than begin with his mother's—the best one in it. Through his mother's love first, he grew into the world. It was first by the door of all the holy relations of the family that he entered the human world, laying hold of mother, father, brothers, sisters, all his friends; then by the door of labour, for he took his share of his father's work; then, when he was thirty years of age, by the door of teaching; by kind deeds, and sufferings, and through all by obedience unto the death. You must not think little

of the grand thirty years wherein he got ready for the chief work to follow. You must not think that while he was thus preparing for his public ministrations, he was not all the time saving the world even by that which he was in the midst of it, ever laying hold of it more and more. These were things not so easy to tell. And you must remember that our records are very scanty. It is a small biography we have of a man who became—to say nothing more—the Man of the world—the Son of Man. No doubt it is enough, or God would have told us more; but surely we are not to suppose that there was nothing significant, nothing of saving power in that which we are not told.—Charlie, wouldn't you have liked to see the little baby Jesus?"

"Yes, that I would. I would have given him my white rabbit with the pink eyes."

"That is what the great painter Titian must have thought, Charlie; for he has painted him playing with a white rabbit,—not such a pretty one as yours."

"I would have carried him about all day," said Dora, "as little Henny Parsons does her baby-brother."

"Did he have any brother or sister to carry him about, papa?" asked Harry.

"No, my boy; for he was the eldest. But you may be pretty sure he carried about his brothers and sisters that came after him."

"Wouldn't he take care of them, just!" said Charlie.

"I wish I had been one of them," said Constance.

"You are one of them, my Connie. Now he is so great and so

strong that he can carry father and mother and all of us in his bosom."

Then we sung a child's hymn in praise of the God of little children, and the little ones went to bed. Constance was tired now, and we left her with Wynnie. We too went early to bed.

About midnight my wife and I awoke together—at least neither knew which waked the other. The wind was still raving about the house, with lulls between its charges.

"There's a child crying!" said my wife, starting up.

I sat up too, and listened.

"There is some creature," I granted.

"It is an infant," insisted my wife. "It can't be either of the boys."

I was out of bed in a moment, and my wife the same instant. We hurried on some of our clothes, going to the windows and listening as we did so. We seemed to hear the wailing through the loudest of the wind, and in the lulls were sure of it. But it grew fainter as we listened. The night was pitch dark. I got a lantern, and hurried out. I went round the house till I came under our bedroom windows, and there listened. I heard it, but not so clearly as before. I set out as well as I could judge in the direction of the sound. I could find nothing. My lantern lighted only a few yards around me, and the wind was so strong that it blew through every chink, and threatened momently to blow it out. My wife was by my side before I knew she was coming.

"My dear!" I said, "it is not fit for you to be out."

"It is as fit for me as for a child, anyhow," she said. "Do listen."

It was certainly no time for expostulation. All the mother was awake in Ethelwyn's bosom. It would have been cruelty to make her go in, though she was indeed ill-fitted to encounter such a night-wind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.