

SIMON GAINALL'S DREAM.

Late in the evening of the 31st of December, Simon Gainall sat posting his books, and trying to square his accounts ready for the new year. But, for some reason or other, he could not make the accounts balance. There was an unfortunate wrong figure somewhere or other which he could not find out, that spoiled the whole of the reckoning. It was not till twelve o'clock that he went to bed, wearied with mental exertion and perplexity. He slept but only to go over again, in his dreams, the perplexing columns of figures which had been vexing him the evening previous. But in his sleep, they seemed still more perplexing than while he was awake. At length, as he happened to look up from his work (he seemed to be sitting in his own counting room, with the same tall candle before him which he had been using in the evening,) he saw the door open, and a man enter, of a fair and young aspect, with an innocent folio book under his arm, bound like an account book.

"Walk in and be seated," said he, absently. "Good evening," said the stranger, "I see you are in trouble; can I help you?" "Yes," said Simon, "that is, if you understand accounts and figures."

"I understand them after my way," said he. "Well," said Simon, "I wish you would help me look over mine a little; for I can do nothing at all with them."

"Let me see," said the stranger. So, taking the great book from under his arm, he laid it down on the table wide open, and sat down beside Simon, who had his own books open before him.

"Now," said he, "show me your accounts. What is the difficulty with them?" "I cannot make the sides balance," said Simon. "I have added the columns eleven times over, and every time they are more and more out of the way."

"Let me see," said the stranger again, looking rapidly over the list of items on each page of the open book. "What is this? A cow sold to Widow Higgins for twenty-seven dollars. What was that cow really worth, Simon?"

"Well," said Simon, "perhaps I did get a little too good a bargain out of the widow; but the cow was worth eighteen dollars, at any rate."

"Here again," two cords of wood to Timothy Peppery for eleven dollars and fifty cents? How many three feet and a half sticks were there in these two loads, Simon? and how much half rotten wood, when it was warranted all sound?"

"What do you say," roared Simon. "Do you mean to accuse me of cheating?"

"I was only asking questions," said the stranger. "I leave it to your conscience to accuse you."

"But what has all this to do with the footing of the columns?" added Simon angrily.

"A great deal, according to my way of reckoning," said the stranger, continuing to look Simon full in the face.

"And then that mortgage of Deacon Peter Jefferson's that you took up. Don't you remember," continued the calm visitor, "that there had been three hundred dollars paid on it, of which you omitted to make account because there was no proof which could be brought of the payment? How do you expect to square your books with such fraud as that recorded in them?"

"How came you to know that, and what business is it of yours?" asked Simon, not only angry this time, but somewhat frightened. "Who are you?"

"It is no concern of mine, indeed; but it concerns you very much," said the visitor. "Pray, how long do you expect to live in this world, Simon?"

"I have made no calculations, I must take it as it comes."

"Well, you cannot live, probably, more than thirty years longer; for you are, I believe, a little over forty now. You may have thirty years to enjoy your ill-gotten wealth; but what good will it do you when you get into the other world?"

"I hear as much preaching as I want to on Sunday; so none of that now. What I want is to have my books squared."

"But don't you want them squared so that they will stay square? You may foot up your columns so that the accounts will look all square and right in the sight of men, but—"

And here Simon was about to lay his hand over the stranger's mouth to prevent him from speaking, but he, taking him by the hand which he had lifted up for his purpose, "I have seen how your accounts stand in your book, now look, and see how they stand in God's book!" and taking up the great volume which he had brought in under his arm, with his other hand, he laid it down on the top of Simon's books, and began to turn over the leaves slowly.

Although it was full of writing, with names in great letters over the top of each page, still Simon could not read them so as to tell whose names they were, till, by and by, the page opened which contained his own account, and where he saw his own name written as plainly as copperplate.

"Did you not know, Simon," said the stranger, "that God kept an account of the thoughts and deeds of men, and that at last, every one must be judged according to what is written in the books?"

As Simon continued to look, he saw that not only all his evil deeds and frauds were plainly written there, but that all that he had only thought of doing, but had not done for want of opportunity, and that these were all, too, set down to his discredit. And he noticed, still further, that the good which he had neglected to do, was also set down against him, on the debtor side of the leaf; for, as it appeared to him, it was a sort of account book, in which his evil deeds were recorded on the left side of the page, while the right side, left for the record of good and virtuous deeds, which should have been placed to his credit, was almost entirely a blank. Simon answered at length, as he continued looking, that he had heard the ministers tell, in their sermons of some such kind of a book, but he never really believed that it existed.

"But now you cannot deny the evidence of your own eyes; for you well know that no mortal could have known and written the things which you read there."

Simon kept on reading, for it seemed, indeed, as though he could not lift up his eyes to look away, which he attempted to do several times. But before he had finished reading his account the stranger took the book up, closed it, laid it under his arm, and stood still, looking at Simon. Simon, too, looked at him; and as he looked, his singular visitor seemed to become nearly twice as tall as he was when he entered the room. Then he laid the great book upon Simon's shoulders. The weight of it seemed to crush him to the floor, so that he awoke, all in a fright, and wet with sweat, gasping so loudly as to wake his wife, who inquired in an anxious voice.

"What is the matter, Simon?"

Simon, after some rubbing of his eyes and some disconnected muttering and mumbling, managed to give his wife some idea of his dream and consequent fright.

"Well," said she, "it is but a dream, after all, and by no means so bad as it might be."

"Yes," said Simon; "but it is true enough, wife, that I have not done just as I ought. I know it."

Although Simon could not keep the dream out of his mind, he was not disposed to think at all times like about it. Sometimes he would feel rather penitent, and promise himself that he would try to come a little nearer to honesty and justice; and not only so, but that he would now and then do a little something to the poor and needy; or

that he would even put a little silver into the contribution-box, instead of coppers. At other times, however, he was very much inclined to treat the whole matter as something about which he need not be much concerned; that it was natural enough for one who was more than usually perplexed to dream disturbing dreams; and that it was no strange thing that some scraps of Parson Donewell's sermon should get mixed up with his dreams.

But while he found it difficult, even in his most penitent moods to resist his fondness for driving hard bargains, so, in his most hard-hearted ones, he could not wholly throw off all sense of the claims of conscience and right, and it must be said, to do him justice, that more than once or twice, he did yield up some whole dollars of anticipated gain to the claims of honest dealings. To be sure it was not done wholly from a love of honesty, for he had some vague fears hanging about him of a reputation, on the next New Year's eve, of the strange visit which had given him the alarm. But it did not come. Still another year, and yet it did not come. Still another year, and Simon at times (though not all the time either) was as hard a customer as formerly. He was by no means entirely given over to business yet, though there was danger that he would be by and become so if he kept on. Although he had some conscience left, he was slowly wearing it out.

One day, which happened to be his birthday, he had made as he imagined, some unusually favorable trades, not altogether on the side of honesty either. He walked home reckoning up his gains in his own mind, and laying plans for their most profitable investment. As he arrived near his own door, he met a funeral procession. It was that of a neighbor of his, who had been in health but a few days before.

"That was a sudden death, was it not, Mr. Gainall?" said a passer-by to him, as he was about ascending the steps to the door. "But none of us," continued the speaker, "have a lease of our lives, not even for an hour."

"True enough," said Simon; "and as he spoke it all the circumstances of the dream and the conversation of his mysterious visitor, flashed into his mind with the quickness of lightning. That evening as he sat by his fire alone—that is, with no company but his wife—he was uncommonly silent and moody. His wife noticed it. She inquired, "What now, Simon?"

He was considerably more silent than usual, or, probably she would not have thought of asking.

"I was thinking," says he, "I am forty-five years old to-day. Neighbor Jackson has left us, and I may be as likely to follow soon as not."

It happened to be the case that his neighbor Jackson had been the victim of one of his hard trades. He thought of that, though he did not say so.

"And," continued he, "if I am ever going to be any better than I am,—and I suppose there is need enough of it,—why, I suppose I had better be about it."

"Well," said his wife, "it is better late than never, you know, as the old proverb says."

And in truth, Simon did really improve his conduct, even noticeably to those who were better acquainted with him. He attended church more regularly, too, although he always had been in the habit of going quite often, at least in fine weather. And, still further, he began to be more heedful to the sermon, instead of letting his thoughts wander during divine service over his farm and in and out of his two great barns, as had been his usual manner.

One day there came along by his house a fancy horse-trader, with several of his four-footed articles of merchandise with him. He calls upon Simon for a trade.

"What will you give me for the lot? I know you used to be a good hand at getting a market for such wags as these. What'll you give?"

Simon looked them over from head to foot. He knows well enough what horses are.

"I won't touch the things at any price," he says.

"Why not? You have traded worse creatures than these are, before this, to my knowledge."

"Well, I have; but I have done enough of that. I'll never buy another horse to sell that I can't honestly recommend."

"Ha, ha! Then you won't sell a great many, I'm bound. But it's funny, isn't it, to hear old Simon talking about honesty! Who ever heard of an honest horse dealer? Not I, at any rate. What's the matter of you, Simon? Do let's have some sort of a trade."

But Simon did not trade.

And this was the way things went on for a year or so. Simon did not always do just right—not even what he himself thought was right, after considering the matter over; but he tried to do better, and he did. He not only refrained from fraudulent transactions but repaid, though sometimes in a sort of sly way, many of those he had formerly wronged. Hearing that the Widow Higgins's cow had died—the very one he had sold her for eight or ten dollars more than she was worth—he actually gave her a thriving young three-year-old heifer, calling it a New Year's gift. To be sure he could have given her two as well as one, without being any the poorer; but he had been so seldom known to give at all, that everybody thought this was a great deal for him to do. But he had never told of his dream, to anybody except his wife, and had never spoken of it to her since the night it occurred.

Several years at length had passed after the memorable evening when this history commences. Simon was again, as before in his counting room, with the accounts of the past year open before him. Suddenly an unusual light seemed to flash before his eyes. He looked up, and the man with the great book again stood before him.

"Simon," said the visitor, "how do your accounts stand to night?"

"Better than when you were here before, I hope."

"Look!" said he, laying open before Simon the same great book, with the page at the head of which stood his own name displayed.

As Simon looked he saw that there were some things this time set down to his credit on the right hand side of the page; although what surprised him was to find that some deeds of his, on which he had prided himself as being very useful and benevolent, were actually put down on the left hand side; while some other things, of which he had made very little account in his own mind, were not only credited on the right hand, but written in golden letters. But before he had a chance to read over a tenth part of the items recorded, and before he had arrived at the record of some things concerning which he had the strongest desire to learn how they stood in heaven's account, the book was suddenly closed up, and the bearer of it disappeared.

It does not appear that the vision ever reappeared to Simon after the second time; but he has had the reputation ever since, and it is to be hoped deservedly, of being a much better and more honest man than he had been in his younger days. And now, reader, although you will never, probably, have the minutes of the recording angel placed openly before your eyes till the day of final judgment comes, still you may, if you look within you, behold with the mental eye as much as Simon Gainall did, written upon the tables of the heart, and counter-signed by conscience—*Home Monthly.*

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