

The Family and the Church.

A STORY FOR GROWN-UP PEOPLE.

WHICH WAS BEST? OR, MR. FALCONE'S DONATION.

By ANNA M. DODGSON.

(Continued.)

"The matter was conducted with the most quiet and the two ladies were very successful. Mr. Falconer was invited to take a little trip to the city with Mr. Howth, who made a partial explanation in order that the medical examination might be correct."

"I'm so thankful it is done," Mrs. Howth said. "Since I began, some irresistible power has been urging me on."

"Don't get superstitious over it," her husband returned, with a smile.

"I am so deeply interested in Mr. Falconer that I feel as if I had done her a really good work."

"Suppose she shares Miss Carter's prejudice?"

"I think her views are too broad; and when a woman has children, she can't think about the future."

"Quite a surprise party gathered at the parsonage on Mr. Falconer's birthday night. Mrs. Falconer was a most charming hostess. Still young, well educated, and with the peculiar tact that is so common to her birthright, she had rendered herself a general favorite alike with rich and poor. The church at Ridgewood had prospered exceedingly under Mr. Falconer's ministrations, and both husband and wife were universally beloved. Nor was it known that several gifts were to be presented."

Miss Carter had not everted from her first opinion regarding the life insurance. She and her mother were the possessors of comfortable fortunes, and could hardly realize the idea of future necessity. She had provided herself with an elegant set of books that the rest might not suspect her of parsimony.

The evening was a most delightful one. Music, chatting, and congratulating Mr. Falconer, presenting one gift after another, and at last Mr. Howth, with a rather amusing speech, handed his pastor the customary large envelope.

Mr. Howth's very moderate explanation had not prepared Mr. Falconer for what he saw—an endorsement policy for ten thousand dollars, payable in ten years if he should live; if not, for the benefit of his family. He gave a quick glance at his wife, and held the paper before her. For several minutes there was a profound silence. Enclosed was a list of the names of those who had contributed.

"My dear friends," Mr. Falconer began, in a tremulous tone, "I know not how to express my surprise or gratitude. When a man looks at the future from a sick bed, and knows that his life stands between his beloved ones and want, it must give a great pang, even if he is ready to obey his Master's summons. I was a poor young man when I first devoted myself to this blessed cause, but before me opened a tempting business prospect. I thought of the hardships, the poverty, and the changes that come to a minister's life, and I confess future ease, and the prospect of being placed above want in my declining years, appeared very inviting. Yet these words rang in my ears continually: 'Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.' I have endeavored to labor faithfully in the Lord's vineyard, and have been blessed in many particulars. Yet though living a peculiar life, we are not unlike other men. Sometimes when I have looked at my dear wife and my little ones, and realized how utterly impossible it was for me to make any provision for their future, a pang has entered my heart. No man, however pure his faith, likes to feel that his dearest earthly treasures are left to the mercy of the world. But God, who is all wisdom and goodness, has put this generous idea in your hearts. Henceforward, I shall devote my life to Him without one troubled thought. If any thing could make me more faithful and earnest, it is knowing that your love has provided for my dear ones. My brethren and sisters, I have no words in which to thank you. May the Lord deal with you as kindly as you have dealt with me."

It must be confessed that Miss Carter was somewhat disappointed. In her exalted idea of spiritual life, she thought it quite a sin for a minister to be anxious about the future.

"It doesn't seem like trusting the Lord very far, she said, rather aggrieved. "And that he should absolutely approve of life insurance?"

"Suppose your mother were entirely dependent on you, Miss Carter," said a friend, "and your income expired with you; would it be a comforting thought for a sick bed?"

The lady gave a little sniff. "It's actually giving him a fortune, and when a minister gets rich, his usefulness is at an end."

"Oh! not always!"

There were many that rejoiced unfeignedly. The young people had made themselves quite merry.

The party broke up at length in the most satisfactory manner. That night, Mr. and Mrs. Falconer gave thanks from an overflowing heart. More than once some quiet tears had been shining in the lady's eyes.

"God has been very good to us," she said. "I feel just like the dear old hymn: 'Not a wave of trouble rolls Across my peaceful breast.'"

Her husband kissed her, with a fond smile, as he replied: "We must live more than ever for our Master's cause."

If such a thing was possible, Mr. Falconer truly did. The church was united and strong in every good work. It had been rather sickly for some weeks, and many demands were made upon him, which were answered in season and out of season.

If Miss Carter had any doubts of her pastor's spirituality, they must have been set aside on the following Sunday. He preached as if he had indeed been touched with the Holy Ghost and with fire. His face glowed with fervor, and his voice entreated until more than one heart was melted.

"I never heard such a sermon in my life," said old Mrs. Green. "I couldn't bear to have him stop. Old Bishop Asbury's mantle seems to have fallen upon him."

For two or three days after he had a dull headache, which he insisted upon working off, and kept about quite as usual. But one morning he could not rise. Mrs. Falconer attended to the calls, and amused the children that they should not be too boisterous. He was feverish and restless, and a physician was summoned.

"I don't want to alarm you," he said, after his second visit; "but Mr. Falconer exhibits unmistakable symptoms of typhoid. His constitution and habits are both so good that we need have little fear."

Then he gave some minute directions. Mrs. Howth took the two elder children to stay at her house, and Miss Carter, whose heart was really kind and generous, proposed to share the nursing. It was difficult to believe danger possible, but the case soon proved unusually severe. Day and night anxious hearts watched and prayed, and eyes questioned what lips dare not put in words. Mrs. Falconer hung over her husband in speechless pain. Her brief life together had been so happy, their love so perfect, that the thought of separation was fraught with intense agony.

There came a time when the doctor looked grave and could give but little hope.

"O Prætor," his wife exclaimed, wild with apprehension; "you will not, must not, let me see him!"

A pale, sweet smile illumined his countenance.

For many seconds he glanced at her tenderly, smoothing her soft brown hair with his wasted fingers.

"My precious darling," he said at length, "it is all in God's hands. Can we not trust Him?"

"Oh! if he will, but be merciful! We are both so young! These years have seemed like a happy dream."

Mrs. Howth was about to leave them at this solemn moment when he caught a glimpse of her and beckoned her nearer. Clasp her hand, he exclaimed in a trembling voice:

"My dear friend, what an inexpressible comfort your wife's gift has been to me, for you were the originator of the plan. Since I have laid here, I have hardly had an anxious thought. If it please God I should like to recover, but in any event I resign myself to his will. It is so delightful not to have such moments shadowed by any earthly cares. God bless you for your kindness!"

Miss Carter was in the adjoining room, and when Mrs. Howth entered she glanced at her with tearful eyes. "I never regretted anything so much," she said, with deep humility, "as not sharing your gift. I see now the benefit of it. If the worst should happen!"

"May heaven avert that!" was the fervent response.

The many prayers were answered, and Mr. Falconer's life was spared. And though the convalescence was slow, it was sure, and interspersed with many delightful hours. It was pleasant to be so beloved.

Some weeks after, an incident occurred that sent a shock even to Ridgewood. The minister of a neighboring town had been thrown from a carriage, and so seriously injured that in twenty-four hours his life was over with him.

"Poor Mrs. Hendricks!" Miss Carter exclaimed. "What will she do with her seven children? She is such a fine woman, too. And you know we liked her so much when she was here."

There was a wide-spread sympathy felt for the bereaved wife. One and another of the congregation at Ridgewood went over and were most kind. Of course the family were left in destitute circumstances. Mrs. Hendricks took her three younger children, and went to reside with a sister, who was but in moderate circumstances. The eldest, a bright boy preparing for college, went into a store; the two next, girls, found situations in families, and another was adopted by a connection. Miss Carter was very generous, supplying many wants passed by in silence by others.

"It's a shame to have them separated in such a fashion," she remarked to Mrs. Howth; "but nothing else can be done. A little money would have assisted them so much. I heard that one or two of the congregation wanted to have Mr. Hendricks insured, but he was strongly opposed by others. As for me, I shall be a true believer in it hereafter. I believe I was as thankful as any one, when Mr. Falconer was so ill, that his family would not be plunged into destitution. Laying up treasures in heaven is perverted a good deal when people think it actually forbids a prudent foresight upon earth."

"While we have time, let us do good unto all men, and especially unto them that are of the household of faith," repeated Mrs. Howth, reverently.

Mr. Falconer came across his wife one morning, as she sat in a thoughtful mood with an open book before her.

"What are you doing?" he asked, looking quite like his old self.

"Putting away my treasures," she said, holding up the policy with a smile. "It's a comfort to me to think that when you are getting along in life, and burthens begin to press heavily, we shall have something of our own. No other gift can ever be quite so important to us, and I thank God that our lot has been cast among such generous hearts."

"And that he has spared me to labor with others have been taken."

They clasped hands in silence, and from both souls ascended a fervent prayer.

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