



THE HELP OF A GUIDING HAND.

THE BELLS' BLESSING.

Open your windows: the bells are ringing,
Hark! how they peal on the wintry wind!
Hark to the song the bells are singing—
Peace and goodwill to all mankind!

Open your hearts: there are sad hearts pleading,
Just for a tender and pitiful word,
Will you pass on with ears unheeding?
Will you go by with hearts unstirred?

Open your hearts: there are old friends yearning
Just to be back in your hearts again;
Oh! is your love beyond returning?
And shall the old friends hope in vain?

Open your hearts: there are weak ones falling
Just for the help of a guiding hand;
Go to them: do ye not hear them calling?
Help them: do ye not understand?

And a light will lighten the saddest faces,
Easy life's burdens will seem to bear;
And a music shall thrill thro' the world's waste
places,
Like the song of the bells on the Christmas air.
F. E. WEATHERLY.

ERIC'S DREAM JOURNEY:

WHAT HE SAW, AND HEARD, AND THOUGHT
ABOUT IT.

CHAPTER I.

The Christmas choir practice was taking place in All Saints' Church, Sandfield. Mr. Browne, the organist, and all the choir were in their places. The body of the church was in semi-darkness, as after the evening service all the lights had been turned out except the standard gas-jets attached to the choir stalls and the organ candles. In a pew by the centre aisle, half way down the church, sat the Rev. Arthur Milner, rector of All Saints. For several months past the younger choristers had been behaving very badly at the practices; the Rector had twice spoken to them about it, but, as Mr. Browne reported that they were still very troublesome, he had decided, on this special evening, to be present at the practice. So, instead of going home after the service to his cosy study and warm fire, he removed his surplice in the vestry and then seated himself in a pew.

All went well until the first hymn was about to be sung. Then, when the choir were standing up waiting whilst the organist played over the tune, the leading boy of the Cantoris side joggled the next boy's arm, causing his hymn-book to fall down with a clatter outside the choir stall, and then he tittered out loud as the boy nearly tipped over in trying to reach the book.

'Tell that boy who laughed to leave the church at once,' called out the Rector in a stern voice, for he had seen and heard what passed, 'and I think you had better dispense with his services for the present.'

For a few moments there was silence in the church. The organist left off playing when he heard Mr. Milner's voice, and all the choir turned their heads and looked down the gloomy church.

'Tell the boy who laughed to leave the church at once,' repeated the Rector.

For a moment Mr. Browne hesitated to speak, then turning to the young leader he said: 'You can go home at once, Eric, and you need not come to the choir again until I send for you.'

Eric Milner, for it was actually the Rector's own son, looked, with a startled and angry expression on his features, first towards the organist and then to where his father sat, and without saying a word walked quickly across the chancel into the choir vestry, slamming the door behind him with a heavy bang. He was sent away and disgraced before the whole choir! The practice then continued without any further interruption to the end.

After they were dismissed the choir boys gathered in the schoolhouse yard to talk over what had taken place. 'Wasn't the Rector just angry,' said a small curly-headed boy; 'I'm glad it weren't me; and did you see Eric's face, I thought he'd have a fit!' There was a general laugh at Curly's speech.

'Ah, it's all very well for you chaps to laugh,' called out a tall, thin boy, nicknamed 'Monument,' who was the other leader; 'Eric is a bit stuck up, but not half a bad sort of chap; he won't get over this in a hurry; I shouldn't. And then it's no joke-losing ten shillings a quarter.

I say, 'Curly,' you'll get his place if he don't come back.

'Three cheers for 'Curly,' shouted another lad, for he was a popular little fellow. This caused a general hubbub, and soon the boys called out 'good-night' to each other, and went to their separate homes.

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'What is the matter, cried Eric's twin sister Mona, as he dashed into the school-room where she was putting her things tidily together before going up to bed.

'Oh, don't bother!' he answered crossly, 'go up to bed and let a fellow alone, can't you?'

'Don't be cross, Eric dear, and do tell me,' Mona said, sitting down on the arm of the chair into which Eric had flung himself, and putting her arm round his neck. They were very fond of each other and much alike in appearance—tall, brown-eyed, brown-haired and brown complexioned. People called them the 'Twin Gipsies.' For a moment Eric felt inclined to tell Mona what had happened; then the hall door sounded, and the Rector's voice was heard telling the man to 'send Master Eric to the study,' so Mona wished him good-night, and went slowly upstairs.

Mr. Milner spoke kindly but firmly to his son about his bad behavior, but Eric was in an obstinate temper and refused to say he was sorry, nor would he promise to apologize to Mr. Brown, the organist. He was, therefore, dismissed from the choir as an example to the rest.

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For many years Eric and Mona had belonged to the All Saints' Band of Hope, and since the boy's thirteenth birthday the curate, Mr. Proctor, had placed the cupboard, containing the hymn-books, service of song papers, and other things in his care; he kept the key, and attended punctually every meeting evening to give out the books and to help to keep the little ones in order.

The next Band of Hope meeting after Eric's dismissal from the choir was held on Christmas Eve, and the Rector looked in at it on his way to see a sick woman, and was surprised to find that nothing was going on. The schoolroom was lighted up, fires burning brightly, children in their places, 'Aunt Mary' at the harmonium, and Mr. Proctor at his table; but they were all waiting, yes, waiting for Eric to come with the keys. But no Eric came. So, as they could not get out the register-book, the service of song papers, and the hymn-books, Mr. Proctor gave them a short address, and, after singing the Doxology, they were dismissed.

But where was Eric all this time? On his way to the meeting he met two of his schoolfellows named Martin, and they asked him to come home with them and have some fun, as Mr. and Mrs. Martin were out at a dinner party, and they could have the house to themselves. Mr. Milner had forbidden Eric ever to go with these boys, as he did not think them fit companions for him. Now Eric had been in a very bad mood ever since the choir practice, sometimes feeling defiant and angry, and sometimes unhappy and miserable, as most boys and girls do when they have been doing wrong, for Eric felt his dismissal very keenly.

'All right,' said Eric, on the impulse of the moment, and walked off with them; a minute later he was sorry that he had joined them, but felt too proud to say so. On reaching the house they marched into the dining-room, stirred up the fire, drew chairs round the fire-place, and then, to Eric's astonishment, fetched a bottle of wine and some cigarettes. Poor Eric, it was the first time that he had been so tempted, and he was in one of his defiant moods. At first he refused to smoke or drink, but they laughed and taunted him so much, that at last he drank a little wine and then lit a cigarette. It was the first time he had ever tasted wine or smoked. We may well say 'poor Eric,' for when once a sin has been committed it is so much easier to do it again, until boys and girls, yes, and men and women, too, learn to actually love the sin. Oh, if children could only understand this, if they were only able to look ahead and see whither one little first sin was leading them, they would shrink away from that sin, and say in horror, 'No, no, I won't.' Eric did

not do so, but, as we shall hear, God was very kind and sent him a strange warning, which he never forgot throughout his life.

When Eric reached home about nine o'clock, he was more defiant and obstinate than ever. How often we feel like that when we have done something very wrong of which we are ashamed. Mona met him, saying, 'Oh, Eric, I am so sorry about the keys, papa wants you again in the study; then noticing Eric's queer look, she asked, 'What is it, dear, some more trouble?' But Eric only pushed her aside, and hanging up his hat and coat, went into the study.

The Rector sat behind his large desk, writing; papers and pamphlets were scattered about on the top of his desk, and a large waste-paper basket, half full of torn paper, stood on one side. The study walls were almost covered by rows of books. There was only one picture in the room—a large oil painting of Eric's mother who had been dead for two years.

Eric shut the door and stood before the desk waiting for his father to speak. At length Mr. Milner looked up at him sadly and said: 'Why were you not at the Band of Hope this evening, Eric? Tell me where you have been.'

No answer. Eric looked down and did not speak a word.

'Eric,' went on Mr. Milner, 'why are you silent? If it was not your fault that you were absent, say so, and I will ask no more questions, for you know, dear boy, I always trust you.'

Still no answer.

'Do you really refuse to tell me what you have been doing, Eric?' continued the Rector more sternly. 'If so, I can only believe that it is something of which you are ashamed.' Then softening his voice a little, 'Am I such an unkind father that you are afraid to tell me? You know how much I love you all, then why do you fear to confess if you have done wrong?'

But Eric said not a word; he did not fear his father's anger or punishment, but, although really ashamed of himself, he felt too proud and obstinate just then to confess; and besides, the wine had mounted to his head, and for the time being all his good thoughts and feelings had flown. Such is the effect that wine and spirits so often have upon people; just as unripe fruit makes the body ill so does strong liquor make the mind and heart ill. Mr. Milner had been told by a servant that she had seen Eric with the young Martins, and, noticing his strange look, he half guessed what had happened.

After a short silence the Rector made another appeal to his obstinate boy. Pointing with his pen to the painted portrait over the fireplace, he said, 'Eric, look at that dear face.' For one moment Eric raised his eyes to the picture, and then looked down again. 'Think of the promises you made to that loving mother before she died.' And here the father's voice faltered, 'remember how dear you were to her, yes, and are still,' he added reverently. 'Oh! my boy, you little know how difficult it is for me to train up and guide my children now that she is no longer here. Have you forgotten promising that you would never break your Temperance pledge, and that you would always help me in my work. Do you remember the Christmas days when, with you on her knee, she told you the story of the child Jesus, who was subject to His parents, and even at twelve years of age was about His Father's business.' All the strictness had now gone from the Rector's voice; he spoke sadly and quietly. But still Eric said nothing.

Seeing that it was useless to go on talking, his father said: 'Now, Eric, you may go; perhaps in the morning you will be in a better frame of mind. If so, come to me before you go off to church.'

Eric left the study and went straight up to bed, without asking for any supper. He was beginning to feel ill, and, oh, so unhappy! Once he thought of going down again to tell his father everything, but did not do so. Throwing off his clothes, he jumped into bed without saying any prayers, and fell asleep.

Ten o'clock striking. Was Eric awake or dreaming? He sat up in bed and counted ten loud strokes of the big hall clock. Yes, ten! At first he thought it must be ten in the morning, for the room was quite light; but he noticed that the