

Family Reading.

THE PRODIGAL. (From Parker's Domestic Tracts.)

There is a common saying in the country round, that it "always rains on Carlington day," and I certainly have often seen it so, but such sayings are not very conclusive after all, and there never was a finer day than the one on which our little story opens.

The town had been through from early morning; at mid-day you could scarcely make your way along the crowded streets, broad as they are; there were bright-faced country girls, and stout fine grown men, and here and there amongst the hawker-dresses of the pennantry, you might see the bright uniforms of soldiers glancing for a moment in the sun-hine and then lost in the moving mass around; from the numbers collected there, you might judge that the market-place was the centre of attraction. One large show, on whose front were hung the paintings of lions, tigers, elephants, and all sorts of wild beasts, took up a great part of it; another large portion was occupied by a booth, in front of which music was playing, and some very fuddled looking individuals in very bright dresses walked up and down, peeringly suggesting to the beholders the delights which awaited them within.

In spite of all the vice and folly which sadden the heart as it looks upon such scenes, there was much to please as well as to depress. It was one day of pleasure to some whose daily lives were full of unbroken toil. You might see, as you looked on, friend meet friend, some apparently surprised at such unexpected joy, and it must have been a cold heart that could look on quite unmovingly on that gathering of happy faces, over which the clear blue summer sky looked down without a cloud.

Thus the day wore on, and as the shadows lengthened, the crowd seemed to grow denser about the smoky fuming oil lamps of the booths which illuminated the scene, their flames winking hither and thither in the cool evening air.

And now let us leave this crowd a while, and go forth out of the town; how still does the world of nature seem as we pass out of the noise and glare of that crowded place; what deep and solemn thoughts come over us of One whom we had forgotten, and cannot but remember here! We pass along a quiet lane, its hedge-rows standing full of summer flowers; the low-lying scent is heavy in the air, and the whole world seems silent and at rest.

Here is the house to which I have been leading you; there can be no doubt what the person's business is who occupies it, the bright flowers, the rows of young shrubs, the glass frames and houses, tell us at once that he is a gardener. Let us enter through the wicket; there he is, the tenant himself of this peaceful spot, old Ambrose Bertram; he is closing a glass frame for the night, and now he stoops to a slight large geranium in a pot which he had overthrown in bending over the frame; he moves languidly as though his heart were not in his work, scarcely caring to put back the earth which he had displaced, and to set the plant in its former situation; and now he walks into his own dwelling, and closing the door behind him, sits down in his old arm chair and looks out into the evening.

It is a fair scene, that on which he gazes; faint orange hills still linger where the sun went down, and surround the minister with his rich tall towers as with a glory; he has often and often marked this with a pleased and thoughtful heart; but there are times with all of us when old signs that have pleased us lose their charm over us; he does not even see that on which his eye is bent, but he hears the far sounds of the festivities of Carlington, and as the foot-passengers or crowded carriages pass his house on their homeward way, he looks for one to come for whose return he is waiting; but the shadows deepen, and first one and then another star comes forth and the minister towers grow dim, and at last Ambrose Bertram rises and closes the shutters of the window, lights his candle, and takes from his shelf what has been his comfort in many sorrows, his Bible and his Book of Common Prayer. He had read the evening Psalms and Lessons, but still the step for which he has been listening is not heard; he takes down another book, and gives to him by his candle, which he has already learned to love, he opens it, and begins to read from the spot where he last left off. The words run thus:

"Of the profit of adversity. It is good that we sometimes have troubles and crosses; for they often make a man enter into himself, and consider that he is here in banishment, and not to place his trust in any worldly thing."

"When a good man is afflicted, then he is weary of living longer, and wisheth that death would come that he might be dissolved and be with Christ. Then also he well perceiveth that perfect security and full peace cannot be had in this world."

Imitation of Christ.

A sound outside on the pathway—the latch is lifted—the old man looks up eagerly—it is his son whom he awaited.

It was a tall handsome youth that entered, his features were not unlike those of the old man, their expression as different as you can conceive. One calm and peace, the other wild and restless. The old man's eye was clear blue, and his complexion, though deepened in some places from exposure to the air, was fair.

Edward's eye on the other hand was dark, as his mother's had been, and his now disordered hair (which was always somewhat long) hung about his face, when although very like his father's, was bronzed all over, and flushed now with unusual colour. He flung himself in silence on a chair.

The old man looked on him surprised for Edward, though he had caused his father much anxiety, had never failed to brighten their home with his gay voice and cheerful smile, and had been always kind and respectful and considerate for others.

"Have you had a pleasant day?" the old man said at length.

"Yes, father," he said in a hoarse and broken voice, "oh yes, very pleasant indeed."

Edward answered, "What is the matter, father?" said the old man, "I would like to see you, that you would give up such pieces of your return from them thus?"

There was a momentary flashing of the eye as reproved would be, the young man sat down by the table, and took the "Prayer-book" in his hand; he opened it, but did not attempt to read it; after a moment or two he laid it down again. His father looked on him silently and sorrowfully.

It is a terrible thing to have something to tell to another, which we know will be the death-blow to that other's earthly happiness; the throat grows parched and dry, the voice fails, the heart beats so that we cannot hear it; we cannot tell it, and yet it must be told.

In spite of all the wild and wayward ways in which Edward Bertram had grieved his good father, there was a deep affliction for the old man which made it very terrible to say what he felt most now he said.

"Father," he began at length, "I have often talked of leaving you, the time is come at last!"—the old man laid his hand upon the table for support (though he was sitting), it rested upon the Bible. "There was a pause; Edward could not proceed; his father did not speak. "Father," at last went on the latter, "I have inquired."

The old man did not speak, his eyes were fixed, and he remained for some moments rigid and unmoving on his chair.

Edward rose and touched his arm—"Father, speak," he said; "who speak, speak if he be to curse me; I have on his side, and I go from you tomorrow; we have often talked of my going forth into the world, now the time for it is come. I cannot stay here, indeed I cannot. I am weary of this life; you know that I am; you shall have no more care and sorrow about me; Sarah will come and keep you home; all will be quiet and regular, as you like it; speak, father; you will not curse me; you will bless me before I go."

Old Ambrose listened intently; he heard every word; as soon as he sufficiently recovered his consciousness, to think of remedies for this deep affliction, he proposed sacrificing all the little that he possessed to buy off his son; the garden was not his own, and it was very little that he had, but he had friends, he would supply to them all, they would all exert themselves to help him that Edward might remain at home.

"No, father," said his son at length, "I thought when I first told you what I had done that I would have given the whole to undo it again, but now it is not so; I must go, you will be surprised to endure it, I know that well, and I shall get on better away, I would not be brought off if I might now."

It was a sad night, Edward was to set off the next morning for—where part of the regiment in which he had enlisted were quartered; it was a sad night, and all the weary hours as they went by, and were told by the solemn tones of the minister's clock, were full of fresh sorrow to the old man's heart, for he knew that each hour would all exert themselves to help him that Edward might remain at home.

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to wake; he did so, and Edward sprang up, and was soon dressed; the last prayer which perhaps they might ever say together was prayed, the last meal which perhaps they might ever eat together eaten.

The arrangements for his departure were completed, few words were spoken, the old man commenced something like an exhortation, but his voice grew broken and inaudible; yet when the last moment came he recovered himself with a great effort, and pronounced distinctly the blessing with which he sent his son forth, perhaps for ever, from the home of his childhood and his youth.

The sorrow of such partings is for those who remain behind; old Ambrose only began to realize what had happened when he went back into his cottage and saw the severely tasted breakfast yet upon the table, the chair on which his son had sat, the cup which he had used, and the knife which he had handled. It is strange how in a great grief the eye will seek all the little things around connected with it; two small bright mugs on the marble piece, relics of Sarah's and Edward's childhood, kept old Ambrose's eye long and sadly fascinated. The woman who came during the day to perform the household work of his little cottage was full of amazement, and asked an infinity of questions; at first he did not seem to hear them, but soon he rose and without answering her went into his garden and worked mechanically for a short time; but it was in vain; he could not continue at this long, so he went into the house and prepared himself for an expedition to Lady Courtenay's house, where his daughter Sarah was in service. He scarcely noted the brightness of the day as he went along, and as he drew near Leigh court, would have passed, without noting it, a low pony chaise in which were Lady Courtenay and her daughter, but the latter recognized him at once, and pointed him out to her mother, who stopped her carriage to speak to him.

Ambrose looked up and took off his hat respectfully. Lady Courtenay, who was a very kind person, and had known the old man for many years, soon drew from him the story of his grief, and telling him to proceed to her house, turned her pony's head and drove back towards Leigh court.

"Send Sarah Bertram to me," she said, when she knighted at her own door, to one of her servants.

Sarah was the head-housemaid, and had been much valued for her extreme steadiness and good conduct ever since she had been in Lady Courtenay's service, which she had entered very young.

Lady Courtenay informed her slightly of what she had just heard, and told her to let no consideration prevent her going home at once, for a while at all events, to comfort her father in the affliction which had come upon him.

And so it came about that on that day Sarah Bertram accompanied old Ambrose home, and eventually took up her abode with him. And all was as Edward had predicted it would be, quiet and regular. Often have I looked upon the old man as he went up the gentle ascent to the minister, leaning on his daughter's arm; or surprised them by a visit in the evening, found him leaning back in his vast arm chair listening while she read to him aloud from the Bible or some other holy book.

All was quiet and regular, and nothing could exceed his daughter's gentle care of him, and yet the old man smiled visibly; there was a hand within whose touch he had loved dearly, a voice which he dreamed of often, but never heard now, and Sarah felt this; painfully at times she felt that she was not enough for him, and sometimes she thought that her father was scarcely so sensible of all she had done and forgave for him as he might have been.

For she had forgone very much for him, since she had come home. There was one by whom she had been long beloved, who had been an heir for long to propose that she should be married, but he should only bring her to share poverty and sorrow; he had worked hard that he might be able to maintain her and have something to befall her to start upon; and now his father had prospered, and he had told her that the time was come for them to marry, the time for which they had both been looking long.

But Sarah had refused to hear of this at present; she had many misgivings about her father's health, and she feared lest news might separate her from him, or at all events prevent her devoting so much time and care to him as she felt that he now required. The sacrifice was a great one, but it had been made; before the altar in the sanctuary it had been made, and none but One knew what it had led on to her. Old Ambrose knew not a word of all this; most carefully had his daughter locked the secret of her trial within her own breast, and yet she sometimes felt vexed and disappointed that the old man did not display a sense of the sacrifice of which she had herself stipulated that he should be kept in ignorance.

But we must return to Edward; he could not leave his home with dry eyes and a light heart; it was the home of his childhood after all, and his old father, as I have said before, was very dear to him; now was he quite without recollection of a face bending with pale cheeks and earnest eyes over his own in the years gone of his youth.

It was a summer evening once more, and years had passed away and many things had changed; old age and death had been busy in the neighbourhood for years, but old Ambrose was still spared. Now this evening deep orange hues were glowing from the sunset, and the air was hushed; the old man looked forth from his window, but on what a different scene from what we first saw him gazing upon; even the dirty court however looked bright in that rich light that was of sky in the wide arch, and a small space of sky might be seen above the pale clear blue, showing how over all places, the most useful, even bends continually the same Mary to love. His daughter had gone out to purchase some materials for her work, and the old man sat alone, his hands clasped, his eyes lifted upward to the sky. The door below opened, and he heard a voice requiring for himself which made him tingle exceedingly—a step was on the stair—the latch of the room door was lifted, and on the threshold stood his son!

None but a father's love would have recognized him, the face was bronzed and the mouth hidden by a deep moustache, the figure bent as by disease, the brilliant uniform which he wore only making his appearance look more wretched than it was. He did not speak. Was it a vision made up of misty a day's dream, or was it the ghost of his last son? No, it was Edward the long-lost found, he knew it by his feet, he was resting his brow upon his knees, and in a broken tone he began, "Father!" he could not proceed, the old man's tears of joy mingled with the young one's tears of penitence. "My son!" murmured the old man, "my daughter, my best beloved! Lord, now I feel that Thou Thy servant's part in power!" There were two persons in the room who were now witnesses of the scene; their entrance had been unobserved, but there they stood, Sarah and Mr. Bernard the clergyman, whom she had met with at the door about to pay them a visit.

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None but a father's love would have recognized him, the face was bronzed and the mouth hidden by a deep moustache, the figure bent as by disease, the brilliant uniform which he wore only making his appearance look more wretched than it was. He did not speak. Was it a vision made up of misty a day's dream, or was it the ghost of his last son? No, it was Edward the long-lost found, he knew it by his feet, he was resting his brow upon his knees, and in a broken tone he began, "Father!" he could not proceed, the old man's tears of joy mingled with the young one's tears of penitence. "My son!" murmured the old man, "my daughter, my best beloved! Lord, now I feel that Thou Thy servant's part in power!" There were two persons in the room who were now witnesses of the scene; their entrance had been unobserved, but there they stood, Sarah and Mr. Bernard the clergyman, whom she had met with at the door about to pay them a visit.

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