

Choice Literature.

RALPH GEMMELL.

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CHAPTER III.—(Continued)

And did Ralph swear this oath? Did he forget so soon the lessons of the old minister? Did he forget so soon his mother's last injunctions? injunctions supported by the word of God, to abide by his duty, regardless of the consequences, to put his trust in God and to despise the threatening of man? He forgot none of these, but he had leaned too much to the strength of his own arm. He had not yet rested his unhesitating confidence on the Rock of Ages. His impressions of religious duty had been strong, and he had not yet fully recognized his own weakness, and his ever present need of Almighty grace. And now when he was threatened with imprisonment and death, when he was reproached by a father with dishonouring his family, and as sailed on every side by entreaties or ridicule, although his tongue faltered, and every limb of his body trembled while he took the oath he did take it. He engaged to assist in extirpating that form of religious worship which he thought most agreeable to the word of God, and which his own conscience therefore approved.

Let us pause here, young reader, and ask ourselves how we are prepared for meeting the threatenings of power and the solicitations of sinful pleasure? True, you are not menaced with the instruments of torture, with dungeons and exile. You see not the sword of persecution laid to your neck, nor the heads and hands of the people of God nailed to the gates of the towns of our country. You have no occasion to fly from your dwelling at cold midnight, and seek refuge in the solitudes of nature. You can go forward in the track of Christian duty, certain that nothing in the shape of external force will meet you to force you out of it. You may put on the uniform of a soldier of Jesus, and march forth to the Christian warfare, secure that no band of warriors, with sword and buckler, will set the battle in array against you, with the determined purpose of dragging you away from under the banners of the Most High. But are you safer on this account? Have you less need of leaning on an Almighty arm? Pause and consider! Are there not waiting you, at every footstep of your journey, unlawful pleasures inviting you, with tongues of sweetest persuasion, to turn aside from the upright path, and promising to entertain you in the gay and flowery fields of unwithering delight? And have you not in your own bosom a set of treacherous inclinations which have at ever greedy ear to every delusive voice, and which are ever willing to wander from the steep ascent of virtue, and to take themselves up with the indulgent offers of present enjoyment? Are not the reasonings of a sophistical philosophy, and the misrepresentations of a false religion ever casting their doubts in your way, to turn you out of it, and draw you into a labyrinth of inextricable difficulties? Will you not meet avarice tempting you with his gold, and ambition directing you away to the gaudy heights of human glory? Will you not, at every step of your Christian progress, have to set your face against the mockery of wanton dissipation, and the studied and pointed ridicule of veteran wickedness? Will you not be solicited by the flattering words and decoying speeches of polished libertinism, which will introduce themselves to your ear with all the warmth of disinterested friendship, and all the gentleness of practised courtesy? Truly you will find these more dangerous foes, more frequent in their inroads and more varied and persevering in their attacks, than the most violent of open and avowed enemies.

When the sword of persecution is unsheathed, and when it is plainly seen that something serious is determined against us, we put ourselves on our guard, advance with caution, examine every step we take, canvas every intelligence and suspect every fair pretender of wishing to decoy us into the snares of the enemy. Besides, when we are beset by external violence we are assisted in repelling it by that principle of our nature which rejects compulsion, and which will not comply with those who will have us their own way, whether we will or not, however agreeable to us their paths might otherwise be. But when vice comes in the guise of seeming real for our good, which infidel philosophy often assumes—or with the wanton jest and immoral illusion, which polished licentiousness is ever dropping from his tongue, or with the witty sarcasm and grave ridicule, which flow so profusely from the lips of irreligious genius; or when it tells us of riches and honours and preferments, and whispers in our ears that if we stubbornly abide by the dictates of honesty, we shall probably die poor; then, young reader, it is that your enemy is the strongest, and that you have most need to call into service all the energies of your religion. Instead of any natural principle coming to your assistance against foes like these, you have many of their friends in your own breast, wishing every moment to betray you, and labouring with all their might to hasten your defeat and complete your ruin.

Beware, then, young reader, of trusting to yourself, for if you do so but for a single step, at that step you will fall. Christ hath overcome the world; put your trust in Him, and you shall overcome it too.

CHAPTER IV.

The Lord is with you while you are with Him; and if ye seek Him, He will be found of you, if ye forsake Him, He will forsake you.—*Leviticus.*

In a little while I hid my face from thee for a moment, but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord, thy Redeemer.—*Isaiah.*

On Ralph's return home, after thus renouncing his religion, his father at first assailed him with the most severe and indignant reproof. He reproached him not only for disgracing a family which had long boasted of its honour, but as he was answerable for the conduct of his family, for exposing him, if Government should exact it, to heavy penalties. And besides, he was told he had thrown an indelible stigma on his character by associating with fanatics and traitors, for such was the light in which Mr. Gemmell viewed the Covenanters. And further, he was assured if ever he ventured again to attend their meetings, or at any future period should show them the least countenance, the paternal estate would be given to his brother, and he disinherited and disowned for ever.

But, as Mr. Gemmell was really concerned for the honour, as he thought it, of his son, he did not leave him with reproach and censure. He assumed a gentler mood, and represented to him how much his disobedience and folly had grieved his heart; promised, if his future conduct were agreeable to his wishes, to pay him the most fatherly attention; to make him his companion in all his visitings and amusements, and to introduce him to the notice of men of the first rank and highest honour in the country—assuring him at the same time that by pursuing the course which he himself had done, he would live in ease and happiness, would be respected and honoured by the nobles of the nation, and would add another worthy name to the dignity of his family.

These last arguments had a powerful effect on Ralph's mind. He had seldom heard his father speak kindly to him; and he was entirely overcome by the present tenderness. His conscience, no doubt, still told him he was wrong, but he had the sanction of a father, and he tried to sanction its complaining. He rode out with his relations in quest of conveniences; he laughed at his own adventure with the Covenanters; he endeavoured to appear unconcerned about their sufferings; he took a share in whatever licentious conversation offered itself, and imitated the profane scoff and wicked ribaldry of his companions. His father rejoiced in the change, and every day showed him more kindness and respect; and all his relations caressed and complimented him as a worthy air of so respectable a house. So much more were his circumstances easy and agreeable than formerly—and so much were his pride and vanity flattered by the attentions and commendation he met with on all hands, that, to the eye of mortal penetration, he seemed to have made final shipwreck of his religion, and to have allied himself by a league that could never be broken with the world which lieth in wickedness. But God seeth not as man seeth. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His thoughts than man's thoughts.

Ralph, as we have hinted, although pleased and dazzled with his present condition, was not satisfied. His conscience often condemned him, and as it corresponded to the word of God, he knew its condemnations were just. On, in the merriment of light hearted excursion, and the mirthfulness of wanton conversation, did its reproaches sting his soul and suddenly sadden his mind with the bitterness of remorse. But especially when he withdrew to repose, in the darkness and loneliness of midnight, and this censor within, directed by the Spirit of grace, set his sins in order before him, and point to the awful consequences.

One night, after having taken more than a usual share in the unholy mirth and licentious revelry which were so common in those times, and nowhere more so than in his father's house, he retired to bed, and had almost dropped asleep when he was quickly alarmed by one of those sudden starts which are caused by a momentary cessation of the pulsation of the heart. Thousands have been thus alarmed at the beginning of their first slumbers, have felt a moment's uneasiness, laid their head again on the pillow, and slept soundly. But it was not so with Ralph. He thought he felt something like the visitation of death about him; a cold sweat suffused his body, and he durst scarcely lay his head down on the pillow. Quick as the lightning's flash did his mind traverse the field of his past doings. The many instructions, advices and warnings he had received from an affectionate mother, the knowledge he had acquired of the will of God in the Bible; the conversation that had passed between him and the old minister; the resolutions which he had so often formed to be religious; the promises which he had made to God never to forsake his duty, all stood up as a strong witness against him. And his renouncing his religion when he knew he was doing wrong; his seeking the praise of men rather than the praise of God; his countenancing the endeavour to extirpate that faith which his own conscience approved of, his mingling in profane conversation when the voice within had bidden him withdraw, his love to the indulgences of wickedness when he was aware that he should have hated them; these, like so many spirits of darkness, gathered around his soul, and for a moment involved him in the gloom of despair. The anguish of his mind affected his body; he shivered, trembled and still imagined he felt death laying his hand upon him. He thought God had forsaken him, and had left him to try what support or comfort the friendship of wicked men could give him in the moment of dissolution. And truly then did he feel how helpless, how insignificant a thing he was! how unequal to tread the darkness of death alone! how weak, how deceitful and how despicable the pride of human strength and the flattering of human honours! He felt that all things below the sun are indeed vanity of vanities, that the soul cannot lean on any of them when shaken by the hand of death; and that man is really dependent on his Maker. For a moment did the terrors of despair convulse his spirit. He saw no smile from heaven, and in that moment he felt a bitterness of anguish, which he would have willingly exchanged for a whole life-time of poverty and shame and bodily suffering. So will you feel, young reader, if ever you be threatened with death, when as ill prepared for meeting it as Ralph was.

But this was only the hiding of his heavenly Father's countenance only one of those kind chastisements by which He convinces His children of their own helplessness—of the weakness of human strength—and of the meanness of this world's glory, and by which He teaches them repentance and humility, and the necessity of putting their trust in Him alone for time and eternity. Ralph was not long left in this state of utter hopelessness; that holy, that watchful, that comforting Spirit, which never loses sight of any whom the Lord hath chosen for His own, came into his soul. Then was his mind turned to the contemplation of that blood which cleanseth from all sin. He wept the tear of true repentance, and prayed in the language of faith: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!" He now saw himself more guilty in the sight of God than ever, but he saw, also, God willing to be reconciled to him through Jesus Christ, and he felt a holy peace and confidence in his Redeemer to which he had been formerly an utter stranger. So much weakness had he discovered in his own strength that he durst no longer put the least trust in it, and so much deceit in his own heart that he durst not promise future obedience. But humbly did he wish to be enabled by the Holy Spirit to make the will of God and His glory the aim of all his future actions. And humbly did he pray that the same Divine Spirit would ever keep present on his mind the impressions which it had received of its own frailty and the world's deceitfulness, that He would ever give him to put an undivided trust in his Saviour, and

that He would, by His counsel, ever guide his feet in the way of everlasting life. Such are the feelings of the true child of God, to whom He saith: "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

Solaced by these thoughts, and committing himself to the protection of his God, Ralph soon sunk into sweet repose.

CHAPTER V.

Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil falsely against you for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.—*St. Matthew.*

Next morning Ralph arose, and resolved, since he could not stay at home without sharing in the wickedness of the house, or exposing himself anew to reproach and ridicule, to spend the day in a solitary walk, and to engage himself in serious thought how to conduct his future life.

He took his favourite walk down the banks of the Irvine. It was the last month of spring. The beams of the morning sun threw an air of sprightliness and gaiety of nature, that smiled around him in the loveliness and vigour of youth. The fields had clothed themselves in their mantle of green, and the singing of birds was heard in the woods. And although he knew how many of Scotland's best friends and most faithful servants of God were that morning wandering in poverty, immured in dungeons, or appointed to immediate death, and although he looked forward to these evils as embattled against himself, yet so entire was his resignation to the will of God—so confiding his trust in the all-sufficiency of divine grace, that his heart took in the joy of nature, and the breathings of its love and thankfulness ascended up to heaven with the universal anthem of nature's gratitude.

"Why should I be sad!" thought the young Christian, "or why should my soul be cast down? The rocks that sport on yonder hills, and the herds that browse on yonder meadow, seem grateful for their day of short enjoyment that will soon end for ever. The songsters of the wood warble their song of praise, although they must soon perish utterly: and why should not I be glad? Why should not I, too, join the happy melody? What are this world's sufferings to me? What! all that the wickedness of man can do? Is not my soul immortal? When this body decays have I not a tabernacle not made with hands, eternal in the heavens? Are there not rivers of pleasure at the right hand of God, secured to me by my Saviour's death? And when the loveliness of this world's scenery, and the mirthfulness of its irrational inhabitants, shall not be seen nor heard any more, shall not I, if I trust in my Redeemer and keep His commandments, stand in the presence of God and the Lamb and sing the song of the Lamb in eternity?"

Employed with such thoughts as these, Ralph had nearly reached the sea-shore, when he was suddenly roused from his meditations by the sound of the military drum, and the tumult of a mixed multitude of soldiers, king's officers, magistrates and others, leading, from the town of Irvine to the side of the sea, a female who, by her looks, appeared to be in her eighteenth or nineteenth year. This young woman, when an infant, had lost her mother, and she had seen her father, only a few weeks before the time of which we speak, torn from her arms and dragged to the gibbet. But the cruelty of persecution is as insatiable as the grave. The poor orphan had been apprehended on the preceding Sabbath at one of those field-meetings whither she had resorted to worship God as her conscience directed her; and because neither entreaties nor threatenings could prevail on her to take the test which we formerly explained, she had been sentenced to be put to death by drowning—a kind of death to which several females were condemned in those days.

In the channel of the sea, from which the waves retired at low water, was fixed a stake, whither, between two ruffian soldiers, the helpless girl was led, and her arms bound to her body with ropes. In the meantime she was again promised her life and freedom if she would take the test. But with a holy indignation she replied: "Seek ye the life of my soul by promising me a few years more of earthly existence: Begone, ye that would tempt me to violate my conscience and deny my Saviour. I trust in my God. I know in whom I have believed. And I know that He will not forsake me."

The tide now began to flow, and she was soon surrounded with the waves, before which the crowd retired. As the water gradually deepened about her she seemed engaged in prayer; and when it reached her waist, as the day was calm, she was heard to say: "Farewell, my friends—farewell, my enemies—thou sun, and thou earth, farewell! Come, ye waters, why come ye so slowly? Come and wait my soul to the bosom of my God!" Here her voice was lost in the sound of the drums that were beat to prevent her from being heard. Her eyes looked up to heaven, and a calm tranquility settled on her face, while every succeeding wave advanced farther up her body, till at last the waters rolled over her head, and hid her from the eyes of the spectators.

You will perhaps ask me, young reader, why I introduce you to a scene like this? Why I shock your feelings by the relation of such cruelties, and oppress your sympathies by the recital of such sufferings? Truly, I am not fond of the tale of distress; nor would I willingly sadden your countenance did I not hope to make your heart better by it. And I think your best interests may be much promoted by thus reviewing the cruelties and sufferings of our ancestors. Thus we learn to what horrible transactions sin leads those who abandon themselves to its tyrannical guidance. How avarice, and ambition, and pride, if harboured and nourished in our bosoms, eradicate all that is amiable in man, and carry him forward into barbarity and wickedness, which place him far beneath the beasts that perish. And hence we gather the strongest proofs of the divine origin of our religion, and how well adapted it is to bear the Christian out through the darkest night of the world's distresses. We hear evil spoken of him, we see him hunted from place to place, and tortured and murdered, but still we see the grace of God sufficient for him. We see him placed on the Rock of Ages, putting away from him, as things of nought, the waves and storms and fierceness of this earth's most angry assault, and, calmly reclining his hope on the promise of his God, looking with a grateful heart and an eye of brightening gladness to the land beyond the grave—the land of his Father and his everlasting home. Hence, too, we learn how much we are indebted to the heaven-supported stand which our forefathers made against the inroads of civil despotism, and the domination of a secular priesthood; and thus we are