

ONE CRUSADER.

Mrs. Avery's visitor was taking her leave but at the door she paused for a last word. It had been a stormy day, and now the late sunshine poured through breaking clouds and illuminated both faces: one strong, sweet, but sad in its plain, Quaker setting, the other fair, sensitive and even girlish, in spite of the white hair that was like the finest flax in its glistening beauty.

"My dear," said the visitor, "I will not urge thee; the Spirit must be thy teacher; only I will pray the Father to show thee thy duty."

Mrs. Avery gave a little gasp.

"O, Aunt Rachel, don't! I—I couldn't bear it if He should show me that duty; I know I could not take it up."

"But if it be duty there is the promise of strength."

"It is not; it cannot be. I have so hated all this crusading; it seems so useless, so senseless. Prayer is to God, if he is to do these miracles: what does it matter where we ask him? Why not here in my home, as well as on the street, or in those vile saloons?"

"Prayer is to God, but it is also for men," said Aunt Rachel. "It is wholesome that our adversaries should be compelled to come into court when we present their cases to the judge."

"If it's wrong and the sorrow had ever touched me personally, perhaps I should feel differently."

"God forbid," said Aunt Rachel, fervently, "but oh, my dear, it has touched me."

"She turned quickly away, and Mrs. Avery closed the door, and went back to her pleasant room with a troubled face. She knew very little of Aunt Rachel's history, and could not guess what sorrow might be hidden in her heart. She was warmly attached to the lonely woman whom the whole town seemed to have taken into relationship, but she felt almost angry with her for having thrust into the pleasant quiet of her life anything so distasteful as this temperance agitation which had just swept into the little town, a wave from the deeper disturbance of the city.

"I'll have nothing to do with it; it is not in my line," she said decidedly, picking up the bit of needle-work she had laid down.

By the window a young girl in deep mourning bent silently over the machine she was feeding with yards upon yards of dainty material. Her busy fingers never faltered in their task, but presently Mrs. Avery caught a faint sob, and looked up to see the tears dropping from the seamstress's eyes. Her sympathetic heart was touched at once, and springing up she swept the work from the machine.

"Now see here, my child," she said gently, "I might have known you were sick, with those pale cheeks; go right home and rest you; not another stitch shall you sew to-day."

"O, Mrs. Avery," said the seamstress, "it is not that; please let me sew, it keeps me from thinking."

"What is it Mary?" she asked gently, can you tell me about it?" The girl broke at the question into a perfect passion of grief.

"It's Rob, Mrs. Avery; I've always been afraid for him, but I've prayed for him so. Oh, I couldn't think God would let such trouble come to me, but the craze was born in him and now they've got him."

"Rob, your brother?" questioned Mrs. Avery drawing the poor girl's head to her bosom, and gently smoothing the dark hair.

"Yes, he is such a good brother, and loves me so much; you see I brought him up, Mrs. Avery; he was only three when mother died, and there was just we two. He's only seventeen now, and we felt so proud when he got a place in Wolfort's drug store. I thought he'd be among gentlemen, and he's so smart, Mrs. Avery, and so handsome. I never supposed they sold liquor at drug stores. Rob didn't tell me at first; he knew I wouldn't like it, but I found it out. It's worse than a saloon, Mrs. Avery; gentlemen can go in there and nobody suspects. Why there are men who go there, just regularly, Rob says, and you wouldn't believe it if I should tell you—"

Mary stopped, and Mrs. Avery's heart gave a wild throbbing; not of fear; she knew her husband too well, she trusted him too fully; but did not these other wives trust? If only Bert were older she might perhaps be anxious.

"And boys too, younger even than Rob; seems as if it ought to be somebody's busi-

ness to tell their mothers; sometimes I've thought I would, but I've been so worried and troubled about Rob, it didn't seem as if I could take up other folk's troubles. You see it was pretty bad before I knew it, and I did go to Mr. Wolfort but he laughed at me, and then got angry. He said if I thought his place wasn't respectable enough for—the son of a man who died a drunkard, I'd better take him away."

"What a brute!" said Mrs. Avery, and that's what makes it worse for Rob; mother told me it would be so. I wanted to take him away, but he will not leave and what can I do, Mrs. Avery? O, I wish somebody would talk to Mr. Wolfort who knows what to say."

"I'll speak for you," said Mrs. Avery. "I'm not afraid of that man."

Her heart was torn within her, but pride closed her lips, and she would not for her life have asked of Mary Neal the question which was never for an instant out of her thought, "Who were those boys? Can it be possible my Bert was one of them?"

Her voice was steady, though her delicate hands fairly clinched each other, as she asked the question of Bert himself in the evening.

"What do you high school boys do with yourselves during your intermission?"

"O, different things," said Bert, carelessly; "loaf about and tease the girls. Twenty minutes is either too long or too short for anything."

"Don't you think some of the boys make nuisances of themselves at Wolfort's?"

"Who says so?" asked Bert, quickly. "Nuisances? Not much; he just tries his prettiest to get us to coming there."

"U. I. what for, Bert? Why should he want you?" and this time the tremble in the mother's voice was unmistakable. "Oh, well," said Bert uneasily, "lots of the boys have money, and they buy soda water and different things; school's an awful dry place, and then most all the fellows smoke, and they get their cigarettes of him, and so sometimes he treats."

"To what?"

"Candies and soda water, and different things. I tell you, Tom Andrus got caught though. He came in and called for soda water with brandy, and didn't see that his father was at the end of the counter drinking the very same thing. Just as Tom took up his glass his father put his down and said as savage as you please, 'Well, young man, things have come to a pretty pass, drinking at your time of life.' That's just what I was thinking," said Tom, looking at his father's empty glass, and all the men laughed so Mr. Andrus had to join in."

"And you were there, Bert?"

"No, ma'am, not that time. I have been there, though, and I tell you somebody ought to look after Rob Wilder; he's going to the bad."

"O, Bert! promise me, promise me never to go there again."

"I promised myself that the other day. I don't intend to be seen in any sort of a whisky shop, whether they call it a drug store, or a saloon. Tom Andrus says Wolfort sells more liquor than any saloon in town; sends it out in bulk to houses, and to gentlemen's offices. They keep things private in the store, and call that little back office a reading and smoking room, but any one can get liquor whom they know."

"That night Mrs. Avery had many thoughts. One was, I shall never feel safe again day or night." Another was, "I will surely speak for poor Mary Wilder's sake," and then, "I will speak for my own sake, and for the sake of every mother."

CHAPTER II.

There were several visitors in the little smoking room at Wolfort's, when the band of Christian women came into the store. Twelve women, some in elegant attire, three in deep mourning, and one, Rachel Lowry, in plain Quaker garb. Some of the faces were pale, but on every one was set the calm assurance of faith, for they had come straight from the presence of the Master, and the Comforter was even then whispering, "Fear not, I am with thee." From street to street of that liquor-cursed city they had carried their message of warning and entreaty, and though some scoffed, there were many who were ready to say, "Though I fear not, God, neither regard man, yet because these women trouble me, I will get out of the business."

But Wolfort was not the man to be troubled. He had loudly proclaimed his

anxiety for a visit, promising to receive the ladies with the utmost courtesy. In truth he redeemed his promise. He received them at the door with an air of profound respect, and invited them to the little room where a vase of flowers among the papers upon the table, were doing their best to overcome the odor of tobacco smoke which pervaded the air. The gentlemen present were all strangers to the ladies, none of the proprietor's regular customers having the fortitude to stay and meet them, although urged to do so. At a sign from Mr. Wolfort, Rob Wilder appeared, his brown eyes dancing with fun, and offered a silver tray, filled with glasses of hot lemonade, to the ladies.

"You must be weary with your good work, ladies," said Mr. Wolfort, and I trust you will allow me to offer you refreshment. It is little enough we poor sinners can do to help on your self-sacrificing work."

"Thank you, Mr. Wolfort," said Mrs. Avery, promptly, "your lemonade certainly looks tempting, but you could hardly expect us, after our week's experience not to recognize the smell of brandy."

Mr. Wolfort colored slightly, but did not seem abashed, though some of his friends laughed.

"The merest drop, I assure you, just to bring up the flavor; not half so much as you housekeepers use in your mince pies, puddings, sauces and jellies."

"For what we have done in our ignorance, may God forgive us," said Rachel Lowry, "but we will never sin again in such fashion."

Mr. Wolfort took up a glass of lemonade and tasted it critically.

"Now, really, ladies, it seems too absurd; the amount of brandy in that lemonade, I do assure you—"

"Might not make a man drunk," interrupted Mrs. Avery, in a quiet tone, "and yet is enough to awaken a taste for such flavors; is enough to feed and foster an appetite that would soon grow beyond being satisfied with the few drops. The amount of brandy in that lemonade is enough to be the first step in a boy's road to ruin."

Mrs. Avery looked steadily at Rob as she spoke; and Mr. Wolfort curiously bade him take away the tray, adding in a low tone,

"Leave the glasses, you'll find use for them at noon."

At noon Mrs. Avery thought of those bright eyes, headstrong, reckless fellows, rushing away for a brief respite from books and lessons, drawn by their boyish appetites into the meshes of this net, finer than a spider's web, stronger than cords of steel. All her fear vanished like dew, in the fierce heat of her indignation, and forgetting everything but her purpose, she first astonished Mr. Wolfort by her full setting forth of his offences great and small, and then so laid upon him the responsibility of such fearful consequences, present and future, that the complacent man began to feel wonderfully like a criminal. Especially did she protest against his course in enticing the boys to their own destruction by his drug-ged cigarettes, and his subtly flavored drinks. The sobbing breath of more than one mother was audible through her words, and when her own tears almost choked her voice, Rachel Lowry sank upon her knees and began to pray. The men stood silent, for no one could leave the room without fairly treating upon the women, and Mr. Wolfort with folded arms, and lips that vainly tried to preserve their cynical smile, listened without daring to raise his eyes from the floor. It was a wonderful prayer, full of the tender compassion of a heart whose own sorrows had rent it so wide that it stood open to the woes of all humanity. It pleaded with God for these suffering ones, for those who were led captives of Satan, but above all it implored his mighty power to touch the heart and arrest the arm of all wrong doers, and the very tones of Rachel's voice carried such a conviction of nearness to the King, that one almost expected to see Him to whom she spoke turn at once and avenge her of her adversaries.

Mrs. Avery stopped to speak a few friendly words to Rob, who was crying openly, and the little band went their way. Mr. Wolfort, with an attempt at bravado, escorting them to the door, and saying with a ghastly smile,

"Call again ladies, whenever you feel inclined, happy to see you always."

"Come with me, aunt Rachel," said Mrs. Avery imploringly, and when the friends

had shut the door behind them the younger woman sank upon a chair saying:

"O dear, I feel as if my faith was giving way. What did we accomplish?"

"What the Lord chose; perhaps He will show us, but we need not be troubled if He does not. I'll tell thee what thee needs."

"More faith, I suppose."

"Thee needs thy dinner and a good sleep."

"Why so I do," said Mrs. Avery with a little laugh of relief. "That was what the angel said to Elijah, 'Arise and eat,' and so we will."

And did they accomplish anything? Some of them doubted when the only result apparent was that Mr. Wolfort summarily dismissed Rob Wilder, and refused to allow the visiting committee to enter his store again. But Mrs. Avery, whose convictions were all right although he seldom allowed them to interfere with his comfort, after laughing at a little his wife's crusading zeal, roused himself to find a safe place for Rob under the best of Christian influences, and gave the fatherless boy a few encouraging words which filled his heart with new hope for the future.

Professor Harden, awakened to a sense of his own neglect of duty, forbade the high school boys entering Wolfort's during the hours over which his control extended, and in some way, best known to himself, was able to enlist Wolfort himself in enforcing the order.

Still the ladies were refused admission, and although the cashier reported that the proprietor was at home and sick, assured them that it was by his authority that they were excluded.

One day a message came for Rachel Lowry. Mr. Wolfort wished to see her.

"You must go with me," she said to Mrs. Avery, and the two were driven to the elegant home of the proprietor. He hardly looked like a sick man, sitting in his luxurious arm-chair by the library fire, but his face was pallid, his eyes were restless, and his hand hot and feverish.

"We are sorry to find you ill," said Mrs. Avery, courteously.

"Are you," said Mr. Wolfort, with an uneasy laugh, "I supposed that was just what you were looking for, that I might be taken out of the way."

Mrs. Avery was shocked into silence, and before Rachel Lowry could open her lips, Mr. Wolfort went on with his eyes on her face:

"I may as well say it first as last, but I am beginning to believe you have bewitched me. I never was a superstitious man; I've said I wasn't afraid of angels or devils, but I can tell you what is a fact—I haven't had any rest day or night since you knelt down in my store and asked the Lord to trouble me and give me no peace until my eyes were opened and my heart touched with repentance. Oh, I remember it all. I laughed but it made the cold chills run over me then. I can't forget it. I say it over to myself till I feel as if I were going crazy. I've heard folks pray before now, but I never heard any one talk to God as if she'd lived neighbor to him all her life, and just expected he was going to do what she asked him to."

"What can I do for thee?" asked Rachel, in her low, quiet voice; "has the Lord opened thine eyes to thee, and touched thine heart to feel thy wickedness?"

Mr. Wolfort writhed in his chair, and glared at Rachel, but presently burst out—

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to stick to a clean, straight, drug business, though there isn't half the money in it. Why, there are fortunes made in handling fine liquors and alcoholic bottles?"

Mr. Wolfort stopped suddenly in his revelations of the trade secrets, and after a little pause, added, "I'd give a little fortune now to be able to sleep as I used to, without hearing that prayer, 'Oh Lord, trouble this man; give him no rest; speak to him day and night.'"

Mrs. Avery was weeping, but Rachel's face was calm, and it seemed to her pitiless, as she answered, "Night and day, for two years, I, too, have heard that prayer. I have never forgotten it since I first heard it from the lips of my boy, dragged into ruin, and made in one moment of drunken delirium, a man-slayer. Does thee remember James Lowry?"

The miserable man turned white to his very lips, and sank back in his chair. "James Lowry! my old chum! and you are?"

"I am his mother; and I—I forgive thee."

said Rachel over her forehead. And then she brought her heart, which was fort.

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