

* * The Story Page. * *

God's Opportunity.

BY DAVID LVALL.

The minister fumbled for a few moments with the fastening of the wicket gate which gave entrance from the church yard to the Manse garden. It could not be that he was unfamiliar with the latch, since it had obeyed his slightest touch for forty years; nor could it be that his fingers were numbed with cold, for though it was an October night, the air was soft and balmy as in mid-summer. It was very dark, however, and neither moon nor stars illumined the wide canopy of the sky. But each step of the way was so familiar to the Rev. Randall Gilruth that he could have walked it blindfold. Once upon a time it had been a joyous path to him, leading to the heights of hope and achievement which had no limit; but of late, since hope had folded her wings, and achievement had hidden itself in the trailing garments of the past, it had become a *via dolorosa* to him. Tonight the bitterness of years had reached its culminating point; he had just been requested by the members of his Kirk session to withdraw from the meeting, as they had matters to discuss which his presence impeded.

Very well did he know what these matters were; they affected him, and him alone. When he had passed through the wicket and closed it with trembling hand, he walked, with slow, reluctant gait, up the gravel path between the laurel bushes to his own door. A strange, deep, heaviness and hush seemed to charge the air, making the darkness yet more intense. The minister drew a long, deep breath, and raised his eyes to the impenetrable sky. There was mute prayer in that look, but it brought him no comfort. For the time being, the bitterness of his relations with humanity seemed to shut out the tenderness of the Divine Being, whose strength had upheld the minister oft-times as he passed through the wilderness.

As he opened the door and the light of the hall lamp fell upon him, it revealed the bent figure of an old man, with a thin, keen, intellectual face crowned by snowy hair, the face of a student and a sufferer—a lonely man whom few understood.

Hearing the door open at least an hour earlier than she expected, his house-keeper, Christina Bennett, came bustling from her kitchen with some concern visible on her kind, comfortable face.

"It's surely been a short meetin' the night, sir?" she said inquiringly.

"It's not over yet, Christina," the minister answered. "I hope there's a good fire in my study, for I feel it cold, very cold."

"Deed, and there's no fire, sir, worth speaking of," answered the housekeeper; "and if you feel it could ye canna be weel. But if you'll come into the kitchen and sit doon in my chair a minute, I'll sune mak' a study fire for ye."

She took the minister's hat from his hand in her quick, brisk fashion, and he followed her into the kitchen, which was a bright, cheery place, lit by a ruddy fire. An old-fashioned chintz-covered easy-chair on the hearthrug offered a comfortable resting-place, into which the minister dropped wearily, holding out his thin hands gratefully to the glowing heat. Although consumed with curiosity as to the sudden ending of the session meeting, Christina restrained herself until she should have doctored the study fire. She proceeded there with an armful of wood, and quickly a pleasant crackling from the other side of the hall indicated that the fire was set in motion.

When she came back, after carefully closing the door behind her, she stood still in the middle of the kitchen floor and regarded the minister with a comprehensive and anxious look. All at once she seemed to realize that the master she had served so faithfully and long was a feeble old man tottering on the brink of the grave. This thought sent a sudden stab to her heart, and gave certain shrillness to her voice as she repeated the question about the meeting.

"It is not over yet, Christina," said the minister mildly. "Mr. Rattray told me it was the desire of the meeting that I should withdraw, which, of course, I did, at once, understanding that I was the subject which they wished to discuss."

Christina stood silent a moment with her arms folded. A certain hard look came upon her wide, pleasant mouth, and she felt disposed to utter some plain remarks about the Kirk session of Wildershaugh.

"I have known for some time, Christina," said the minister, in a slow, painful voice, "that my services are no longer acceptable as they were to my people. The reason for this, I suppose, is not far to seek. I am old and spent, and they desire a young man in my place."

"If ye are auld and spent, sir," said Christina, indignation and emotion struggling for the mastery in her voice, "in wha's service hae ye spent yoursel' I should like to ken? Eh! I would just like to let them hae my tongue for five minutes in the vestry. I wad Kirk session them! A bonny Kirk session they are, with that upstart Rattray at their head!"

"Hush, Christina," said the minister, mildly, trying to restrain the outpouring of his faithful servant's wrath. "I cannot listen to such words. It is a hard case, of course; but they have right on their side. I will save them the painful duty by sending in my resignation this very night."

"Deed, and ye'll do a heap less," said Christina indignantly. "What for should you resign? Ye have been minister o' Wildershaugh for forty years, and whatever they may say, there's no' a minister in the countryside can preach the Gospel like ye. It's that they dinna like, sir. They want a young man that has neither hope or Gospel in him, so that he may preach to suit them, Pharisees that they are!"

"Christina," said the minister tremblingly, "will you hold your peace? I know very well that your words are actuated by your devotion to me; but they are not becoming, and I pray that they may not be true. See if my fire has kindled, in order that I may go to my own room."

Thus rebuked, but not at all humbled or convinced, Christina bounced into the study and gave the unoffending fire a vigorous poke. The minister followed her there, and drawing in his worn leather chair to the fire, sat down, not giving Christina the slightest encouragement to remain or to utter another word.

About half an hour later a loud and imperative knock came to the front door, and Christina, with a very forbidding look on her face, made haste to open it. Her expression did not become pleasanter as she recognized the figure of Alexander Rattray, the chief merchant and leading resident of Wildershaugh, as well as ruling elder in the Kirk session.

"Good evening, Christina," he said affably; "is the minister in?"

"Fine ye ken he's in," she snapped. "I wonder ye dinna think black, burning shame o' yoursel', Sandy Rattray, to stand there and ask if he is in, kennin' what your errand is!"

At this unexpected outburst the merchant's rubicund face reddened a little more.

"I do not wish to hear any of your impertinence, woman," he said angrily; "and it shows how very little control the minister has over his own household when you would dare to speak in such a manner to me. I shall not fail to complain to him about it."

"Oh, ye can say what ye like about me, my man," said Christina in lofty scorn. "It'll neither mak' me up or down wi' the minister. Ye're a bonnie lot to haud a meetin' to send the minister away; and I hope he'll stand on his rights and snap his thoomb at ye. Fine ye ken he can bide if he likes."

These words goaded the merchant into such anger that he could not trust himself to speak further with the woman. He therefore brushed past her and, without knock or ceremony, himself opened the minister's study door.

Mr. Gilruth, having heard the voices at the door, stood up expectantly when the elder entered. There was a silent dignity and pathos in the old man's attitude and look which made a certain impression on the sordid soul of the man who had striven so hard to serve his own ends.

"I have come, Mr. Gilruth," he said, rather quickly, "to intimate to you the result of the meeting."

"I am waiting to hear it, sir," said the minister quietly. "After a good deal of discussion, Mr. Gilruth, the meeting have unanimously come to the conclusion that it will be in the best interests of the church to appoint a colleague for you without delay—a colleague and successor," repeated the merchant pointedly. "And it has been decided to offer you a retiring allowance."

"How comes it that you alone bear the decision of the meeting to me, Mr. Rattray?" inquired the minister mildly. "It is usual for two elders to wait upon the minister on such an important occasion."

"Well, to tell the truth, sir," said the merchant with a hint of impatience in his voice, "no one else would come. Of course, there is a good deal of feeling in the matter, and we are all prepared to admit that it is a little hard on you; but at the same time the interests of the church have to be considered, and, without wishing to hurt your feelings, it is my duty to point out to you that something must be done to get a hold of the young members of the congregation, or they will be lost to us altogether."

"You think, then," said the minister, with a slight sad smile, "that the interests of the youth of the church have suffered during my ministry?"

"Well, you see, sir," said the merchant, with an assumption of greater knowledge, "you know as well as I do that young minds require different mental and spiritual food from those who are old and more experienced. It is necessary that to keep the hold of these young minds a minister should march with the times—should be up-to-date, as it were. You follow me, I hope."

"I follow your words certainly," said the minister. "Their special significance for me at the present

moment is that I am out of date. Well, it may be so; but, so far as spiritual matters are concerned, Mr. Rattray, I would remind you that there is only one Gospel, and that no man dare tamper with it. It has been found sufficient for young and old through all ages, and though many false doctrines have been offered to us, none have ever shaken that blessed Gospel at its foundations. It still remains the only antidote for human pain and the only salvation for human souls."

"That's all very well in the main, Mr. Gilruth," said the merchant, a trifle impatiently, "but that is wandering away from the point. I am sure that you will not wish to make the position of the church at this crisis more painful than it need be. It is the wish and decision of the congregation that some change should be made, and that at once. As you know we are far from being a rich congregation, and when it is proposed to offer you continued residence in the Manse and fifty pounds a year, I am sure that you must acknowledge that the church is acting as generously as it can be expected to act."

"Oh, yes, that is all right," said the minister with difficulty. "I shall be much obliged to you, Mr. Rattray, if you will withdraw; I prefer not to discuss these details with you. After all, they are immaterial, and do not affect the fact that my ministry in Wildershaugh is over. You can go back to the Kirk session; if they are waiting the result of this strange interview, and tell them that they will hear from me in the course of the next four-and-twenty hours, and I would prefer not to have any further talk with you or any of them on the matter."

"I see that you are not going to accept the inevitable gracefully," said Rattray, who had a coarse strain in him and could not understand the peculiar bitterness and humiliation of which the old man's heart was full. When he would again have spoken, however, the minister, with a peremptory wave of his hand, indicated the door, and promptly rang the bell for Christina to show the unwelcome visitor out.

"I see that you are harboring a personal resentment against me, Mr. Gilruth," said Rattray, somewhat sourly, as he moved toward the door, "which I must say is neither justified nor fitting in the circumstances. I have long known, of course, that you have personally disliked me—jealous a little, perhaps, of my growing influence in the place."

Rattray paused suddenly, for the usual mild and gentle expression on the minister's fine face had changed to one of righteous anger.

"Sir," he cried in a voice of thunder, "I will not bandy words with you. What you are I neither know nor care. You are answerable for your deeds only to your Maker, as I am. He will hold you responsible, I doubt not, for your insult of this night to a poor, feeble old man."

With that Christina opened the door, and Rattray was thus prevented uttering further speech. When he had withdrawn the minister walked swiftly to the door and locked it after him. He was ashamed and pained by his momentary outburst, and yet he was but flesh and blood, and the man's insolent and patronizing demeanor had been more than he could bear.

He threw himself into his chair again and covered his face with his hands. Great hot tears, wrung from the depths of a wounded heart, forced themselves between his thin fingers and fell unheeded to the floor. For forty years he had gone in and out among the people of Wildershaugh, sharing their joys and sorrows, spending himself in their service, and now they would none of him. He had given them his youth, his best work, his means, reserving barely enough to cover his simple needs; and, lo! now that he was old and infirm they cast him off. Though he did not believe that the voice of Rattray was that of the whole congregation, the fact that a session meeting had been called to discuss the deposition was significant of the attitude of at least a portion of the people. He had no redress, nor did he wish to seek any. To his keen, proud, sensitive heart, the only course open to him was to gird up his loins and go. But whither? Well did he know that in the great busy mart of life there is no room for the old; that even the middle-aged have to jostle and push for standing-room. The world and its rewards are for the young, the vigorous, the buoyant, not for such as he. He was absolutely penniless. Only yesterday he had given the last five pound note of his quarter's salary to a poor woman who, unless succor came, would be homeless.

The old man shivered before the warm glow of the fire, thinking that soon he might be numbered with the out-cast and the homeless. Then a strange sweetness seemed to filter through the gloom of his awful desolation, and a new sense of kinship with the persecuted Christ raised him high above the woes of earth and set him within the Holy Place. "The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head." "Behold the hour cometh, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave

me alone." "My death."

These words, wrung from his brief ear, the old man's mind. And then, of the past hours.

So Christina found packet which had sprang afresh in her white face, upon peace.

Becoming conscious stirred in his chair.

"It is you, Christina. I dreamed I was in his back to earth."

"Umph! I didn't know. The Lord's fear."

Then she handed fully opened first very official-looking had adjusted his eyes he shook his head.

"I don't seem to 'Read it aloud.'"

She took it from a voice which took proceeded.

"DEAR SIR—We firm in Kimberley, terms of the will of city, and some time Lanark, you are the Syme, whose person too, is left absolutely inclosed letter, written we have been asked instructions, we are,

The inclosed letter fingers and read with his heart, yet it rebuffed.

"DEAR MR. GILRUTH, Wat Syme, but he had that you paid twenty once to save him from chance. I never for day at the Broomfield out here, it is clean to spend it—every one seems hard to die who how I'm not afraid. have been able to help And that is another a wastrel everybody a good one. So grateful.

"Cast thy bread up after many days," renewed faith in his clasped his hands in words fell tremblingly mine unbelief."—The

Say

The Rev. Lyman Beecher, was accustomed sometimes, when he would beg the privilege. He sharpened his own

One day he left his and in his shirt sleeves large pile of wood to his job without being recognized his head significantly the wood asked Dr. Beecher.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Do you work for of

"Yes."

"What sort of an old

"Oh! pretty much enough to work for."

"Tough old chap, isn't

"Guess so," said Beecher.

upon him."

"Where can I get a

the wood.

"Don't know, unless

Calling the next day

fresh from the hands of

find that Dr. Beecher

"Oh!" said the Doctor

to buy my saw. You

have some of your wood

Student

The time has come

for the ministry at

asking for opportunities

vacation. Several of

considerable experience

ordained. Any mission

or Prince Edward Island

of one of these brethren

at the earliest date

pastors who are planning

supplies, or some church

burdens of their pastors

few weeks? Application

A. C.

Wolfville, N. S., March