

CHOICE LITERATURE.

MISTER HORN AND HIS FRIENDS; OR, GIVERS AND GIVING.

BY MARK GUY FRANKS.

CHAPTER IX.—INTRODUCES US TO ANOTHER FRIEND.

Very much unlike most of the other intimates of Mister Horn was the Bill Smith aforesaid. Very much unlike James Niggardly, Esq., or old Mast'r Jowl, or even Friend Chaffer, was this big, broad-shouldered, honest son of Vulcan. Yet none the less was he a friend, and our record would be very incomplete without a full-length portrait of Mister Horn's favourite disciple.

Nor could you wonder at Mister Horn's interest in him. He was yet a boy when his widowed mother, with her last breath, commended him to the care of her old "class-leader." And henceforth, however unpleasant it might be to the young apprentice, Mister Horn came to look upon him almost as a son. Bill, on his part, had done his best to be free from this oversight; indeed, had done enough to wear out all hope and patience; but no matter what trouble or what disgrace he got into, he found his mother's friend waiting with loving entreaty and wise advice—not unmixed, it is true, with a well-deserved rating. 'No was this all. Mister Horn believed in the artillery of prayer—that no city of Mansoul with mighty gates and massive walls could withstand its power if you only keep pounding away at it. Heaven itself could be carried by storm; then what mortal man could stand it, though all the hosts of hell were leagued inside? Twenty years of such unwearied, unflinching prayer, had riveted Bill Smith to Mister Horn's heart by more than fetters of brass.

Bill was apprenticed to the village blacksmith. But do not let visions of the chestnut-tree and its surroundings rise in the mind. Old Graves was as much unlike the traditional blacksmith of poetry as the stern realities of life generally are unlike the poetical descriptions thereof.

A bent old man, like the figure of an ancient Atlas without the world on his back, his head thrust forward as far as it would go, and a thick clump of projecting hair going out beyond that like a horn. He went about always solemnly shaking his head, as if reading the "vanity of vanities" in the dust on which his eyes were fixed; wheezing with asthma as if his own bellows had to work hard to keep the inner fires going. He might, perhaps, have taught Bill to poke the fire and to handle the tongs, only he always claimed that as the master's part. The pupil's was to sling the sledge-hammer to shoe the village horses, and to do all other work whatsoever belonging to the art and mystery of a smith, by the aid of such natural wit as he possessed. To Bill, with those broad shoulders of his and those stout young arms, work was a joyous thing. He whistled cheerily to the roar of the bellows, and sung to the ringing anvil, never thinking that he kept the house over the old man's head—but always thinking that some day he should greatly like to keep the roof over the head of somebody else, whose sweet voice Bill often stopped to listen to as it sang merrily away at the little kitchen window.

Meanwhile what Bill himself was blind to see was perfectly plain to the eyes of that somebody else. And when, in the cold, damp weather, father was at home wheezing, and shaking his solemn head at the fire as if dumbly preaching to it of its cold, dead, ashy future, how could fair Jenny Graves keep herself from seeing that it was Bill who kept them in bread and cheese. And for her father's sake, of course, what else could she do than like him. Not that he was anything to her—of course not. But as a dutiful daughter she was bound to admire those broad shoulders and those strong arms that did her father such good service. And was it not for her father's sake that she stepped into the smithy to see that all was going right in his absence? Who knew, indeed, what this apprentice might be about? So sweet Jenny Graves often stood like a pretty picture framed by the old doorway of the smithy, her pleasant face and slim figure, the white arms with the sleeves still pinned back to the shoulder, coming for a minute and then tripping lightly back again. How should she know that for a full five minutes afterward the strong hands of the apprentice lay idle on the hammer as it rested on the anvil, and the apprentice wasted five precious minutes in gazing vacantly at the duck pond and ash heap that lay before the smithy? or that for the same space of time the hand held the chain of the bellows listlessly, while the vacant gaze peered into the depths of the fire? How should she know it, indeed, unless it were because she stood dreamily looking out of the window with hands that only played with the dough, or trifled with the soap-suds, for a like space of time?

The truth that fair Jenny had seen with half an eye was forced upon her more plainly as the time went by. The days soon came when Jenny had to step into the smithy to look after her father as well as the apprentice, and found him unable to use the hammer, and scarcely fit to hold the chain of the bellows with his trembling hand. He could do little else but sit by the smithy fire with his leathern apron spread over his knees, dumbly shaking his head over the flame, as if solemnly prophesying to the horseshoe of the evil days that were in store for it—that it was all very well to glow about it now but the time was coming when it should be cold and hard; when it should be trodden under foot; when it should be rung on the hard highway for many a weary mile, and plashed in the dismal mud; or, there was no knowing, lifted up by an angry heel to serve a spiteful kick. Prophecys that were suddenly interrupted as Bill seized the glowing mass with the tongs and made a shower of glory fly from it, and then dipped it hissing in the trough. But before long that place was deserted, and solemnly shaking his head as if predicting his speedy end, old Graves took to his bed, and soon fulfilled his prophecy by departing this life.

Bill was not yet out of his time when poor old Graves passed away. But being master both of his trade and of Jenny's affections, he took at once the daughter and the business. And Mr. Horn came in to give his blessing to

each, and thanked God that life began so brightly with the widow's son and his happy wife.

For a while things went on as pleasantly as they promised at the first. But there came a slow-creeping fear across Jenny's heart, like a gathering cloud, that by and by burst in a deluge of sorrow—a flood of grief that swept away all peace, and comfort, and almost all hope, and left a life belighted, blasted, cursed.

Bill's visits to "The Green Man" had been daily at their marriage. The whole village held that there was no harm in a half-pint now and then. The whole village, however, might have known better, for there was abundant evidence of the horrible mischief that began in that half-pint now and then.

The whole village had heard Mister Horn's opinion about it often enough—unfortunately he had many opportunities of giving it. "There mayn't be any harm in a half-pint now and then, but there is death in the pot if you will go to the public-house to drink it. There's a good deal more than a half-pint o' beer in the matter then. There's company that nobody would say that there's no harm in; and there's temptations that a man is a fool to get into, and that 'tis hard work to get out of. The mouse liked cheese, and thought there was no harm in a nibble now and then. Well, there wasn't. But when he went into the trap to get it, that was another matter, as mousie found out to his sorrow. Like many others, Bill's half-pints became more frequent; occasionally an evening was spent with the company that gathered there. And one night Bill came staggering home drunk, swearing, quarrelling, ready to strike his own gentle wife; it seemed as if a swarm of devils had burst into the house that night. They had taken possession of it, and it would be a long time before any could cast them out. That night poor Jenny's face lost its roses, and from that night onward for many a wretched month. With bitter grief she went to tell Mr. Horn of her sorrow; while shame and vexation, and a mad kind of defiance of everybody, sent Bill soaking all the next day within the shelter of "The Green Man." The misery of soberer moments drove him for some relief to the public-house, to its company and its drink. Home was home no more; each evening was spent at the public.

The house of God was forsaken; the old associates were cast off. Mister Horn came and entreated and rated, but all in vain. Surly and miserable, Bill listened without a word, or angrily claimed his liberty to please himself. Meanwhile, what with earning less and spending more, the home and all about it soon became as miserable as himself, and gave him another excuse, though none was needed, for going again to "The Green Man." The little cottage was stripped. The ornaments that had been Jenny's pride, the furniture itself, the very clothes, were gone for bread. And now looking in at the dark smithy door, fearful of the angry oaths that would greet her, was a pale-faced, thinly-clad woman, and a ragged child hiding frightened in the folds of her dress.

There were hours—days—of remorse; days in which Bill avowed amendment, in which he sought to be again the Bill of olden times, and hope flushed the pale cheek for a moment, like the dawn of a brighter day. But the spell of the curse was on him. Good resolutions were swept to the wind, and down again he would sink, lower and deeper than ever. Poor Jenny must have given in with a broken heart, but for the hope and help that Mister Horn never failed to bring her. He, too, might have despaired, but that day and night he pleaded for the widow's son with an importunity that would not, could not, give him up; prayer could do miracles still.

At last the answer came. Bill himself must tell the story, as he never failed to tell it when somebody needed encouragement, or when others told of what the Lord had done for them. Bill wasn't a man of many words, and he didn't belong to the school of weeping prophets; but it was hard work for him to get through without one or two break-downs.

"Eh, friends, I have heard folks say sometimes that 'tis hard work going to heaven. And they talk of their temptations and trials. Well, I went along the road to hell a bad bit, as many of you know. That's a hard road if you like. Talk about your temptations and trials, why the place for them is all along the downward road. To see me going home with their wages, decent and happy, and you going sneaking in your rags, to spend it all upon yourself, that's enough to make a man feel like a wretch and a fool. To go along by a nice tidy cottage, with the man working in his garden, and a tidy woman looking out o' the doorway, and the children helping father—and then to come into your own place and to see it all mounds and heaps, to see the windows stuffed with rags, to see your poor wife so miserable that she can hardly speak to you for crying, and the little children run away so soon as ever you come for fear of the man that's their own father—that's temptation if you like. Hardly a chair to sit down upon, not a bit o' fire in the grate; a d to see the wretched wife and poor little pale-faced children sit down to a bit o' dry bread, all because they've got a father who spends his money in drink—that's something like a temptation and trial. To go wandering about the lanes on a Sunday, and hear the church bells or the singing of the children, and to mind how you used to go with them, and to think of the dear old mother as took you there—and then to think o' where you're going to, that's something like a temptation an' trial. Why many's the time that I've climbed over a gate, and hid behind the hedge to get out o' the sight of some decent man going up to the house of God with his children. Temptations and trials! Why, often and often's the times that I've had hard work to keep my own hands off my own self, I've been that mad with myself, and that miserable—and I should have done it too, but for a kind of feeling that some day somehow or other I should be turned round by God's mercy helping me. And I thank God that I was."

"It was a Saturday night. I was more miserable than ever, and was angry at myself for feeling so. I was sitting in the beer-shop all without a word, and the rest were chaffing me for being so glum, till I felt as if I must have hit them, when up comes the landlord with my score. It was two shillings and one penny. I counted it out and flung it on the table among the puddles of beer. Then a half-drunk

fellow who had been a Methodist sings out, 'Eh, that's right, Bill, thee's been takin' lessons from Mister Horn—a penny a week and a shilling a quarter—only it's for thy beer score.' They all laughed at it as a wonderful joke. But that just finished me up. I was mad with misery before an' this capped it all. 'For going to hell!' I cried, and I rushed out leaving the landlord and the rest o' them staring.

"It was a wild night in March. The wind howled and moaned about me. The great black clouds hid the moon. All was dreary and desolate as if God had forsaken me. I walked on, not knowing where I went, or caring either, until I got to a lonely place down on the marshes. I felt that I was as big a fool as I was a sinner, and I thought that I would kill myself and end it all. The wind came hissing in over the water, muttering and whispering all kinds of dreadful things. Now and then the moon would break out for a moment, and the darkness covered it all up again. At length my heart was broken, and flinging myself on my knees, I could pray, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' I felt sure that if I did not get saved then I never should. I had put it off and off, and got worse each time. If I put it off again I should surely be lost. So I began to roar aloud in my misery and earnestness. I forgot all about the time. I prayed on hour after hour. The wind had gone down—I remember as if it were yesterday. The dawn was just creeping up, cold and gray. Then came the remembrance of those words, something like this, 'Jesus Christ by the grace of God tasted death for every man.' It broke with faint light upon my soul, but slowly it came to mean more and more—'For me!' I thought, and hoped, and half believed. For every man! I cried again. For such a wretch and drunkard as I had been! Ah! I can never tell how, but I saw it all in a moment! 'For me,' I cried, 'yes, for me;' 'by the grace of God for me.'

"I often think of it, and I sing those lines o' the hymn-book like as if they were put there on purpose for me:

"'Tis Love! Thou didst for me;
I hear Thy whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee:
Pure, universal Love Thou art;
To me, to all, Thy bowels move—
Thy nature and Thy name is love.

"I know Thee, Saviour, who Thou art—
Jesus, the feeble sinner's Friend:
Nor wilt Thou with the night depart,
But stay, and love me to the end;
Thy mercies never shall remove;
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

"The Sun of Righteousness on me
Hath risen, with healing in His wings:
Wither'd my nature's strength, from Thee
My soul its life and succour brings:
My help is all laid up above;
Thy nature and Thy name is Love."

It was all right after that, friends. I'd tried it in my own strength before. Good resolutions and all that won't hold a man when the temptation comes on him. He breaks them and goes just where the devil likes to drive him. But when Jesus comes he turns the devil out, and then a man sits down at those blessed feet, clothed, and in his right mind."

CHAPTER X.—HOW BILL SMITH MANAGED.

One day old Mrs. Catchpole, as was her custom occasionally, called in to see Widow Hunt, to enjoy a little gossip about their neighbours.

Life had not a great many comforts for Widow Hunt, but there was one so richly enjoyed that it made up for all deficiencies in number or variety. It was to sit after dinner, when all was "tidied up," in her clean white cap well frilled at the edges, and to hear the news. Let others soar after the sublime, and talk of their lofty ambition, Widow Catchpole's index of real happiness was to hear the latest gossip of the village—of marriages in the bud, and whispers of how Hodge was a-keeping company with Joan; of marriages blossoming, and how that the day was fixed; of marriages fruitful, as they were always at Tattingham, babies coming, babies come, and babies going through all the wonderful range of life that belongs to babydom.

Widow Hunt's was the rare gift of listening well. Never obtruding an opinion or interrupting any remark, she invariably came in like an echo at the end of a sentence, faintly repeating the last two or three words with a serious shake of her head. To-day she sat on a low stool before the fireplace, her elbows resting on her knees, the hands exposing the palms to the grate, and her projecting chin turned up toward the speaker. And seeing that the day was extremely hot, and that the fireplace shone brilliantly with black lead, it was at least creditable to the old lady's strength of imagination that she sought thus to screen her face and to warm her hands.

Her good friend, old Mrs. Catchpole, possessed the more common gift and grace of gossip. A shadow—the faintest murmur—even a fancied whisper, could supply her with gossip for a day. The Israelites made bricks without straw—judging from her gossip old Mrs. Catchpole could have made them without clay. Out of very little grew the most amazing secrets, told as if tremendous issues hung upon them; and even a passing glance sufficed to reveal to Mrs. Catchpole prodigious events, to which the gunpowder plot wasn't fit to hold a candle, so to speak.

She had nodded to Bill Smith as she came in at Widow Hunt's door. The lingering image suggested the topic on which old Mrs. Catchpole started as soon as she sat down by the frilled white cap, and "just got her breath," as she said.

"I count, my dear, I do, as Bill Smith must be a-making money," she began.

"A-making money," mumbled the white cap as it shook itself very solemnly.

"Why, there, it aint more nor five year ago sin' he was a'most the poorest man in the parish, a-drinkin' an' a-hidin' about, as were quite disgraceful, an' his wife lookin' that starved—for all she kep' herself to herself, and thought as