

[For the 'Messenger.'

A Brand Plucked Out of the Fire.

(By Rev. John Wood, Ottawa.)

Poor Sandy Miller was a kind-hearted, fairly well-educated, but not over-wise Scotchman, a baker by trade, doing a prosperous business in the little Western town in which he had settled on coming out from his native land. He was naturally well disposed towards religion and religious people, was a regular attendant at the Congregational church in which the writer had just begun his ministry, and although not, on my first making his acquaintance, a Christian, yet he was one whose attentiveness, and apparent interest in the preaching of the word were such as to lead me to hope for his speedy conversion and connection with the church. His wife was much of his own disposition, although in business matters, much the 'better half,' shrewd, alert, and, like many besides their countrymen, fond of the 'bawbees,' and well able to take care of them. Having but one child she was the shop-keeper, while he drove the bread-cart, and delivered the bread to his customers.

But Sandy had one sad failing,—he was fond of the drink. Not that he was what we understand by a habitual drunkard, but occasionally when he was worried with business trouble, or met an old friend whom he had not seen for a long time, he would take a glass, intending it to be only one, and then, for the next two or three days, he would be entirely unable to control himself. Some of his customers, too, were hotel-keepers who, knowing my friend's weakness, and concluding that 'one good turn deserves another,' declared they would not buy his bread unless he took an occasional glass with them. Thus the appetite grew upon him until, before he was aware of it, he became its slave. Like many others who indulge it, he thought he could 'take a little or let it alone,' but he generally contented himself with showing he could take it!

Things had been going on in this manner for some years when I first met with him. Drink had led to domestic broils, and, shortly after I became his pastor, I was grieved to learn that he had been taken to the lock-up the previous evening for abusing his wife. Whiskey, of course, was at the bottom of it. It was the first public exposure of his weakness, and of the domestic infelicity it was occasioning, and he was so greatly ashamed over it that he kept out of sight as much as possible for some days after it. But being anxious to see him, I called at the shop to enquire for him, when his wife informed me, with a look, the meaning of which I well understood, that Sandy 'was na' vera weel the day.' I expressed the desire to see him, however, but while I was doing so I could hear my parishioner rising from the lounge upon which he had been lying, in the room behind the shop, and somewhat precipitately starting off upstairs. Determined not to be balked, and, feeling, at the same time, that I could take a liberty, in that instance, that I cannot but confess would be entirely unwarrantable on general principles, I quietly followed him, guided by the sound of his retreating footsteps, till I found him, taking refuge in a clothes-closet, and there, he on one chest and I on another, we sat down

and had our talk! It was a memorable visit,—a hand-to-hand contest, not with one another, for poor Sandy took very kindly the affectionate warnings and counsel I gave him, but a contest with the devil of drink, in which, by God's grace, I believe a good work was begun in him which ultimately brought him off victorious.

Not long afterwards, in a time of gracious revival, our friend was, I believe, truly converted, and united with the church, his wife coming in with him at the same time. Then began a struggle with appetite which terminated only with life. He had never taken the pledge of total abstinence, his reason for not doing so being, apparently, the desire of reserving to himself the 'liberty' of a social glass, when occasion required. Possibly he imagined that now that he was a Christian some mysterious change had been wrought in his physical constitution, so that the drink which formerly had crazed him would now take less effect upon him; or that God would 'give his angels charge' concerning him, to keep him, if he should indulge, for, as we know, Satan can quote Scripture to give potency to his temptations.

Whether Sandy secretly resolved to abstain or not, I am unable to say, but for two whole years, or more, from the date of his confession of Christ, he walked consistently, and, as far as I know, wholly abjured the intoxicating cup. But one day, just when his friends were beginning to feel confident that he had obtained the mastery over his appetite, and to hope he would never yield to it again, the saddening word came to me that poor Sandy had fallen, and had been taken home drunk! He had met an acquaintance whom he had not seen for a long time, and, in a moment of weakness, had gone with him to a saloon he had formerly frequented to have a social glass, and, being unable to stop at one glass, he had gone on till intoxicated. Worse still: the spell was broken, and the old thirst for strong drink was revived, and having yielded once, it seemed of less consequences to abstain in future. His self-respect was gone, discouragement at failure weakened any remaining purpose to renew the struggle with the evil one, and perhaps destroyed faith in prayer, and from that time forward, for many months, he continued to tittle, with occasional outbreaks into open intemperance. Friends pleaded with him; as his pastor I sought to encourage him and point him to the refuge and strength of the soul in peril, or in trouble; and the church kindly admonished him, but all to no avail. His feet continually slipped, and after some months of patient waiting, the church, feeling that the honor of Christ, as well as its own good name, were at stake, took final action, and removed his name from its roll of membership.

The wisdom of the church's action in such a case is, perhaps, open to question. Excision is an extreme measure, and only to be resorted to in dealing with those who are seemingly impenitent, and in love with their sins, and that Sandy, assuredly, was not. He was, I believe, truly sorry for his fault, and sincerely desirous of avoiding a repetition of it, and when informed of his exclusion from membership, he felt as if he had been hardly, if not unjustly, dealt with, and for many months absented himself from the services of the church altogether.

And without justifying his resentment, is there not some ground for thinking that a spasm of virtue sometimes seems to seize a church, and the poor, half-reclaimed and struggling inebriate, who falls again through sore temptation, is made a 'scape-goat' for all the other sinners in the church? Doubtless the comparative ease with which the charge may be proven, and the disgrace it brings upon the rest of the membership, may have much to do with the apparent remorselessness in which the judgment of the church is often pronounced in such a case, but few, I think, will be prepared to say that these men 'are sinners above all men that dwell' in our Zion. For not drunkards alone, but the covetous, and extortioners also, and all who 'walk after the flesh,' and have not the spirit of Christ, are declared in Holy Scripture to have 'no inheritance in the kingdom of God.' Not those who fall and are expelled, but those, often, who remain in the church and just manage to escape her censures, though utterly of the world in spirit, are the real enemies of the cross of Christ. Perhaps my unfortunate friend may have had some such thought, and may have felt that he had too little sympathy from those who were never tempted to go astray in the way he did; but, as I was saying, for a long time he forsook the house of God. Naturally, his course in this respect, did not tend to improve matters.

But whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth. He was trying to get away from God, but the loving father held his hand and would not let him go. Trouble must come, and one day while coming down the stairs, formerly mentioned, he fell and fractured his arm. The drink did it, but the fall sobered him, and he saw that there had been but a step between him and death. His heart was touched, and, deeply and sincerely, I believe, he repented of his sin as he confessed it to me. We prayed together that he might have strength to overcome it, and for some time it seemed as if the victory were won. Yet, although I often visited him, he did not return to the house of God.

Six months, perhaps, passed, and again he fell, and again a downward course began. He had not proceeded far, however, when he was suddenly pulled up by another accident on the same stair, down which he again fell while intoxicated, this time breaking his leg. The injury was slow in healing, in consequence of the bad condition of his system, and he was confined to the house for eight months, and sober, for he never indulged to excess at home. It was only when in the company, of others who drank, and urged him to drink, that he weakly yielded to the temptation. Almost in despair regarding him, I yet hoped and prayed that this second accident, and narrow escape, might prove such a lesson to him as to become a real blessing in disguise. 'God's way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known,' and surely he who 'is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,' was in all this, quietly working for the rescue of the soul of his servant.

But the struggle was not to end yet. Not so easily does the drink demon relinquish his hold on one whom he has once got into his power. Our poor friend could no longer say No! to the tempter, and the very first day he was able to appear on the street, on crutches, some 'friend'—I might