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Uncle Terry

CHARLES CLARK MUNN

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She was dressed in simple white, her masses of sunny hair half concealed by a thin blue affair of loosely knitted wool and had a cluster of wild roses at her throat. It was a new and pleasurable experience to be walking beside a well dressed young man whose every look and word bespoke enjoyment of her society, and she showed it in her simple, unaffected way.

That evening's gathering was a unique one in Albert's experience and the religious observances such as he never forgot. The place was a little square, unpainted building, and when Telly and he entered and seated themselves on one of the wooden settees that stood in rows not over a dozen people were there. On a small platform in front was a cottage organ and beside it a small desk. A few more entered after they did, and then a florid faced man arose and, followed by a short and stout young lady, walked forward to the platform. The girl seated herself at the organ, and the man, after turning up the lamp on the organ, opened the book of gospel hymns and said in a nasal tone, "We will now commence our services by singing the Forty-third Psalm, and all are requested to rise an' jine." In the center of the room hung a large lamp, and two more on brackets at the side shed a weak light on the gathering, but no one seemed to feel it necessary to look for the Forty-third selection.

Albert and Telly arose with the rest, and the girl at the organ began to chase the slow tune up and down the keys. Then the red faced man started the singing, a little below the key, and the congregation followed. Telly's voice, clear and distinct, joined with the rest. A long prayer, full of halting repetitions, by the man at the desk followed, and then another hymn, and after that came a painful pause. To Albert's mind it was becoming serious, and he began to wonder how it would end, when there ensued one of the most weird and yet pathetic prayers he had ever listened to. It was uttered by an old lady, tall, gaunt and white haired, who arose from the end of a settee close to the wall and beneath one of the smoke dimmed lamps. It could not be classed as a prayer exactly, for when she began her utterance she looked around as if to find sympathy in the assembled faces, and her deep set, piercing eyes seemed alight with intense feeling. At first she grasped the back of the settee in front with her long, fleshless fingers, and then later clasped and finally raised them above her upturned face, while her body awoke with the vehemence of her feelings. Her garb, too, lent a pathos, for it was naught but a faded calico dress that hung from her attenuated frame like the raiment of a scarecrow. It may have been the shadowy room or the mournful dirge of the nearby ocean that added an uncanny touch to her words and looks, but from the moment she arose until her utterance ceased Albert was spellbound. So peculiar and yet so pathetic was her prayer it shall be quoted in full:

"O Lord, I come to thee, knowin' I'm as a worm that crawls on the alth: like the dust blowa by the

winds, the empty shell on the shore, or the leaves that fall on the ground. I come poor an' humble. I come hungry an' thirsty, like even the lowliest o' the alth: I come an' kneel at thy feet believin' that I, a poor worm o' the dust, will still have thy love an' perfection. I'm old an' weary o' waitin'. I'm humble an' bereft o' kin. I'm sad an' none to comfort me. I eat the crust o' poverty an' drink the cup o' humility. My pectorator an' my staff have bin taken from me, an' yet for all these burdens thou in thy infinite wisdom hev seen fit to lay on me I thank thee. Thou hast led my feet among thorns an' stuns, an' yet I thank thee. Thou hast laid the cross o' sorrow on my heart an' the burden o' many infirmities fer me to bear, an' yet I bless thee, yea, verily shall my voice be lifted to glorify an' praise thee day an' night, for hast thou not promised me that all who are believers in thy word shall be saved? Hast thou not sent thy Son to die on the cross fer my sake, poor an' humble as I am? An' fer this, an' fer all thy infinite mercy an' goodness to me, I praise an' thank thee tonight, knowin' that not a sparrow falls without thy knowin' it, an' that even the hairs o' our heads are numbered.

"I thank thee, O Lord, fer the sunshine every day, an' the comin' o' the birds an' flowers every season. I thank thee that my eyes are still permitted to see thy beautiful world, an' my ears to hear the songs o' praise. I thank thee, too, that with my voice I can glorify an' bless thee fer all thy goodness, an' fer all thy mercy. An' when the day o' judgment comes an' the dead rise up, then I know thou wilt keep thy promise, an' that even I, poor an' humble, shall live again, jinin' those that have gone before, to sit at thy feet an' glorify thee fer life everlastin'. Fer this blessed hope, an' fer all thy other promises, I lift my voice in gratitude an' thankfulness an' praise to thee, my Heavenly Father, an' to thy Son, my Redeemer, tonight an' tomorrow an' forever an' forever. Amen."

To Albert, a student of Voltaire, of Hume, of Paine, and an admirer of Ingersoll, a doubter of Scriptural authenticity and almost a materialist in belief, this weird and piteous utterance came with peculiar effect.

When the prayer meeting was concluded with an oddly spoken benediction by Deacon Oaks, and Albert and Telly were on their way back to the point, Albert asked:

"Who was the poor old lady that prayed so fervently? I never heard anything like it since I was a boy."

"Oh, that's the Widow Leach," Telly responded. "She always acts that way and feels so, too, I guess. She is an object of pity here and very poor. She has no relation living that she knows of, lives alone in a small house she owns and winters has to be helped. Her husband and two sons were lost at sea many years ago, and father says religion is all the consolation she has left."

"Does she always pray as fervently as she did tonight?"

"Oh, yes; that's her way. Father says she is a little cracked about such matters. He pities her, though, and helps her a good deal, and so does most every one else here who can. She needs it." Then, after a pause, she added, "How did you enjoy the meeting, Mr. Page?"

"Well," replied Albert slowly and mentally contrasting it with many Sunday services when he had occupied a pew with the Nasons at their fashionable church in Boston, "it has been an experience I shall not soon forget. In one way it has been a pleasure, for it has taken me back to my young days." Then he added a little sadly, "It has

might think I was, maybe, because I am not a professor of religion. For that reason I should be classed as one of the sinners, I presume."

"Well, so is father, but that doesn't make him one! Deacon Oaks calls him a scoffer, but I know he trusts him in all money matters, and I think father is the best and kindest man in the world. He has been so good and kind to me I would almost lie down and die for him if necessary."

"How do you feel about this matter of belief?" Albert asked after a pause. "Are you what this old lady would call a believer, Miss Terry?"

"Oh, no," she replied slowly, "I fear I am not. I always go to meeting Sundays when there is one—mother and I—and once in a while to the Thursday evening prayer meeting. I think it's because I enjoy the singing."

When they reached the point Albert could not restrain his desire to enjoy the society of this unaffected, simple and beautiful girl a little longer. The moon that Frank had planned to use was high overhead, and away out over the still ocean stretched a broadening path of silvery sheen, while at their feet, where the ground swells were breaking upon the rocks, every splash of foam looked like snow white wool.

"If it's not asking too much, Miss Terry," said Albert with utmost politeness, "won't you walk out to the top of the cliff and sit down a few moments while I enjoy a cigar? The night is too beautiful to turn away from at once."

Telly assented, and they took possession of the rustic seat where Albert had listened to her history the night before. What a flood of emotions came to him as he watched his fair companion, all unconscious of his scrutiny, and with them a sudden and keen interest to unravel the mystery of her parentage and the hope that some time he might do it. He also felt an unaccountable desire to tell her that he knew her pathetic story and to express his interest in it and his sympathy for her, but dared not. "It may hurt her to know I know it," he thought, "and I will wait till she knows me better." Instead, he began telling her about himself and his own early life, his home, his loss of parents, his struggle to earn a living and how much success he had so far met.

When his recital and cigar were both at an end and it was time to go in he said, "I may not have another chance to ask you, Miss Terry, before I leave here, but when I get back to Boston may I write to you, and will you answer my letters if I do?"

The question startled her a little, but she answered:

"I shall be pleased to hear from you, Mr. Page, and will do the best I can in replying, only do not expect too much." When he had bidden her good night and was alone in his room the memory of Mrs. Leach and her pitiful prayer, coupled with Telly's pleading eyes and sweet face, banished all thoughts of sleep, and he watched the moonlit ocean while he smoked and meditated.

(To Be Continued.)

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