

UNDER THE EVENING LAMP.

GOD'S OPPORTUNITY.

BY AUTHOR OF "THE LAND O' THE LEAL," ETC.
In the Queen
(Conclusion.)

"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. Rattary?" 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 older 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 "Their special significance for me at the present moment is that I am out of date.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. Rattary, 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 the 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. Rattary, 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 Rattary, 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 Rattary somewhat sourly as he moved towards 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."

Rattary paused suddenly, for the usually 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 Rattary 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 patronising 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, receiving 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 Rattary was that of the whole congregation, the fact that a session meeting had been called to discuss his 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 succour came, would be homeless.

The old man shivered before the warm glow of the fire, thinking that soon he might be numbered with the outcast 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 soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death."

These words, wrung from the Master in the Gethsemane of His brief earthly life, followed each other through the old man's mind, bringing soothing comfort with them. And then, being strangely worn out by the strain of the past hours, he fell asleep.

So Christina found him when she brought in a bulky packet which had come by the evening's post. Tears sprang afresh in her wet eyes as she surveyed his worn white face, upon which God had laid the seal of His own peace.

Becoming conscious at length of her presence, he stirred in his chair and opened his eyes.

"It is you, Christina," he said with a smile. "I dreamed I was in heaven, and I am not fain to come back to earth."

"Umph! I dinna wonder; but it 'll come richt, sir, dinna fear. The Lord 'll be mindfu' o' His ain."

Then she handed him the letter which she had carefully opened first with the ivory paper knife. It was a very official-looking document, and after the minister had adjusted his spectacles and studied it for a moment, he shook his head.

"I don't seem to comprehend it, Christina," he said. "Read it aloud."

She took it from him, nothing loth, and read aloud in a voice which took a triumphant and joyous note as she proceeded.

"48, Castle Street, Edinburgh.

"October 28th, 18—.

"DEAR SIR,—We are instructed by our corresponding firm in Kimberley, South Africa, to inform you that, in terms of the will of the late Mr. Walter Syme of that city, and some time of Wildershaugh, in the county of Lanark, you are the sole legatee of the late Mr. Walter Syme, whose personal estate, amounting to about £12,000, is left absolutely and unconditionally to you. The enclosed letter, written by Mr. Syme on his deathbed, we have been asked