



OUR STORY



The Conversion of Widow Gregory.

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WIDOW GREGORY was a church member. That could not be considered a serious fault; on the other hand, it is generally deemed quite proper and highly respectable. But it was the one important fact in the widow's life, and the circumstance which bounded her somewhat limited view.

The name of her church would give but little indication of her religious views. Indeed, her creed seemed a composite one, and partook more or less of various types. She was a fire-eating Methodist, a hard-shelled Baptist, and a pre-destined Presbyterian in one; these, mingled with a strong strain of Puritanism of the days of Cromwell, combined to make her, as everybody thought, and she herself believed, the most religious person in the community. Old Dr. Higgins said she had more religion to the square inch than any one he had ever known, and the doctor knew most everybody.

But, then, she could not help it. It was born in her. Before she had married Jim Gregory she had been Cynthia Allen, and the Allens for generations had essayed to set the standards of morals and religion in the neighborhood. As a girl she had been serious, and everyone wondered why it was that this fun-loving, good-natured Jim Gregory had been attracted to her; but when the wonder subsided they thought he might perhaps draw her out of her serious ways. But not so. He became a candidate for the original Mr. Henpeck. The years had torn the lines of her firm mouth upward, but downward, until a decided melancholy droop was always seen on her face.

The late lamented James Gregory, as she always referred to her husband, had died a few years previous, leaving her at fifty with a very comfortable portion of this world's goods, a wonderful fund of advice, which she always kept on tap ready to distribute indiscriminately, a will that could brook no interference, and a temper which generally rose to the occasion.

She was a self-constituted arbiter and critic of the conduct of the whole neighborhood, and laid down very strict rules governing all phases of life for the guidance of her neighbors. And woe betide any one who fell short of her standard, for they were sure to receive some of her ever-present admonition in phrases more forcible than charitable.

She showed no partiality. Old and young, male and female, all and sundry, must conform to her ideas as chief church member, or be assigned a place in her black books and be subject to dreadful warnings and dire condemnation. It was not surprising, then, that her sphere of operation was large and her circle of friends small, for there were few indeed who escaped her critical inspection in the church or out of it.

Indeed, the minister himself was a poor, deluded soul, not well grounded in faith, because he preached twenty-minute sermons on such commonplace topics as your duty to your neighbor and Christian citizenship rather than discourse for

an hour or more on the nature and attributes of God.

Was it any wonder, then, that most of the congregation should be "weak brethren" in her eyes? And she firmly believed that were it not for her watchful admonition and her striving to bolster these weak ones and to coerce and prod them up to her standard, that the church would collapse just as utterly as though the main supports were removed from the building itself.

She delighted to hark back to the years gone by. "Those were the days!" she often explained. There were no meetings now like the kind they used to have. Those were the times of a "free and full salvation," and she spoke of it upon every occasion possible, until one day old Dr. Higgins had remarked to her: "Well, Cynthia, it's my opinion salvation is more free than full in your case, and I guess the church treasurer will back me up."

From that time forth Dr. Hiram Higgins became the subject of her most virulent attacks. He received twice as many warnings and lectures as his neighbors. The minister was taken seriously to task for his intimate association with the "unbeliever." But the doctor regarded himself in the light of a public benefactor, for he said:

"The more time she spends on me the more rest some one else will have."

So time went on, and Widow Gregory still preserved the church from absolute decay, and wondered why it was that consuming fire from heaven or beams from the forest had not been the lot of Hiram Higgins.

She was accordingly somewhat surprised one day late in the fall to see the old doctor coming up her pathway and leading a child of about five years of age by the hand. She girded herself for the fray, and met him with an austere look and manner.

They talked for a while, and the widow ejaculated with decision:

"Hiram Higgins, I tell you it's impossible. I'm sorry the child's mother is dead, but I can't help it. Do I look like a likely person for a matron of an orphanage asylum for little children whose fathers may be drunkards, and do not care for them? Hiram, I tell you it's according to scripture, 'the sins of the fathers visited upon the children,' and you can't go against scripture."

"That's right, Cynthia, you can't," and scripture says, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these ye have done it unto me.'

"The devil can quote scripture, you know," she replied.

"So he can, so there's a pair of us," chuckled the doctor.

"Hiram Higgins, it's not to be thought of. I can't afford it. I am sure I am not justified in spending the money the late lamented James Gregory worked so hard for, in any such way."

"Cynthia, you have a big home here, and it's empty and cheerless. What you need is a child's face and a child's laughter, and something to love, and so I brought him to you. I'd take him myself, but I'm too busy, and, besides, a bachelor can't bring a child up right. I'm going to leave him, and if you can't afford it, I'll pay his board." And without another word he was gone, leaving the poor little chap.

Widow Gregory started after him, paused, then sat down, and apparently forgot the child. She was lost in thought.

"Please, I'm hungry," piped a timid voice, at last.

"Boy, what's your name?"

"Please, ma'am, Billy—Billy Dugan."

"Well, William, I shall keep you here to-night, but to-morrow you must go."

"Are you going to whip me?" asked the boy, half frightened.

"No! child, no."

"Then, why do you call me William?"

Mother only called me that when she was cross at me," and the little voice trembled. "I think I'd like to be called Billy best. Uncle Hiram calls me that."

"Who's Uncle Hiram, pray?"

"Why, the doctor man who brought me. He says he's my uncle."

"Oh, he does, does he; well, you might have a better one, I'm thinking."

"Oh, he's a good man," said the child to my mother, and brought her clothes and food, and he told me nice stories. Are you going to be my mother now, my really mother's gone?"

"Fine stories he'd tell you!" ejaculated the widow, ignoring his question.

"Yes, he did," persisted the child. "About a good man who was always doing good things, and he loved poor people, too, just like mother and me. Uncle Hiram said his name was Jesus, and he wanted me to be a good boy all the time. Say, don't you think Uncle Hiram is just like Jesus, for he loves poor people, is he?"

Widow Gregory did not reply, for she was thinking. The little chap sat on the floor beside her, and then his little head nestled against her skirts and he was asleep. Gently she lifted him to a couch.

That night when she put him to bed he slipped to his knees.

"I want to say Uncle Hiram's prayer," he said. "He held me on his knee and told me to be one night—that was before mother died," and there was a catch in his voice when he started:

"Dear Jesus, I am just a little lamb, and I want you to be my shepherd and take care of me. I am so small, but you said, let little children come to you, and I know you will watch me while I sleep. When I wake in the morning make me a good boy each day, so that I will grow to be a good man, like you were. Amen."

I guess Uncle Hiram said that prayer when he was a little boy, for he is a good man." The little head nodded, the blue eyes closed, and he was fast asleep.

Widow Gregory retired late that night. What she was thinking we do not know; perhaps of unfulfilled hopes, perhaps the mother heart stirred within her, but, just as she went to sleep she said to herself, "I think I shall call him Billy."

A month passed, and again the doctor and the widow were found in conversation.

"Well, Cynthia, here is a check for the month's expenses, and I have managed to find Billy a home."

"So have I," she said, as she tore the check into small pieces. And as the doctor went down the street he murmured: "A little child shall lead them."

Christmas drew near, and Billy talked of Santa Claus and candles and toys. He had never known a real Christmas, but Uncle Hiram had said the Santa Claus would come, and he believed it with all his childish heart.

The night before Christmas, Dr. Higgins, laden with mysterious parcels, went to the widow's home. There he found an enormous pile of parcels, and the minister in deep consultation with the widow.

"Now, have we forgotten any?" she asked, just as the Doctor entered. "Why, what's all this?" he asked, his eyes big with astonishment.