

COMPETITIVE WORKMEN.

BY FAYE HUNTINGTON.

CHAPTER I.

A few miles back from a flourishing inland city, the name of which is not an essential in my story, you come to a point called the Centre. Here are clustered the school-house, the blacksmith's shop, the post-office, and half a dozen dwelling houses. Standing a little aside, upon "the green," there was a few years ago an old weather-beaten structure, known as "The Old Church." Though in a tolerable state of preservation, no regular service had been held in it for many years. Now and then a funeral service was conducted within its sacred walls, and sometimes a strolling lecturer would set forth his peculiar views to a large audience as he could muster. But for the most part the old church was closed and silent, though the older people of that section could tell of the days when its old-fashioned pews were well filled every Sabbath day, and when stirring words of gospel truth were heard regularly from the sacred desk. There was one other building at the Centre, the presence of which may account for the decline of religion in that community. I ought to say two more—the first, the hotel, with its—in that section—inevitable lar. Somewhat removed from the Centre was the cider-mill, where the fruit of the orchards that stretched back from every farm-house was brought in wagon-boxes and carried away in barrels, to be stowed in cellars for winter use. A rival of hotel lar Oh, no; its helper—its preparatory department! No rumseller was ever jealous of a cider-mill!

Perhaps a more forsaken, dilapidated, thriftless neighborhood could not be found than this of which I am writing. Some of the outlying farms showed signs of thrift and wealth, but for the most part it appeared as if a spell had been thrown over the neighborhood, and that everything was going to decay. On rainy days the post-office and blacksmith's shop vied with the hotel in the entertaining of visitors and loungers, but on Sunday the hotel had all for its own.

Into this forsaken neighborhood there came, in the month of November, a few years ago, two young men, strangers to each other. They were scarcely more than boys, yet they were to exert influences in that neighborhood that could be lasting as eternity. Both had been led by a peculiar train of circumstances to settle for a time in that place. In neither case had it been a step of their own choosing.

There was this difference: the one acknowledged the Hand that led him; the other did not.

Philip Stuart had not been used to recognizing special providences, or, indeed, any providence. He had not been used to ordering his life in any special sense by God's word. He had not, for a long time, been used to studying the Bible; but when he was a boy in Sunday-school he had learned certain verses which would come back to him now and then, and which surely had an influence upon him in leading him to the Centre.

Upon that dark November day he had an important question to decide. What had, at first, seemed to him like rare good fortune, had opened a door through which he plainly saw the road to wealth. When one has been looking out for a chance to earn his daily bread, and the way to great riches suddenly opens before him, there seems scarcely a chance that he will hesitate to take the steps that will put him in that path. But Philip Stuart had hesitated greatly, to the wonderment of his uncle and the friend who had offered him the position, which would put him upon the royal road. Philip had struggled through his college course, and was now absolutely without a dollar. He had sought in vain for a position, and when reduced almost to starvation, he was offered a paying clerkship in a wholesale liquor-store; said offer being accompanied with a hint of partnership by-and-by. He knew there was money in the business. He knew that his work would not bring him into personal contact with the liquors, and he was aware that none was retailed by that firm. He knew, too, that if he refused the offer, he had no place to lay his head the night. He had been stopping with his uncle for a few days; but if he declined the proposal of his uncle's friend, he would no longer be a welcome guest; and where he was to sleep

he did not know; neither where his supper was to come from.

For hours he had been trying to decide. Several times he thought the question was settled—now in the affirmative, now in the negative. Then the bewilderment as to what to do next would rise before him, his weary head and empty stomach rebelling against the continued strain to be put upon them. Then when he decided, as he thought, in the affirmative, there was that text—"Take heed and beware of covetousness"—to confront him. Wearily the hours went by while he halted between two opinions. It seemed utterly impossible for him to decide. Philip Stuart was not a Christian; he had never had the habit of taking his perplexities to his heavenly Father, and it did not occur to him that that was the way out of his difficulty, and so he puzzled over the question, settling and unsetting it, until he was utterly bewildered. The trouble was, the thought of his own poverty, and that text, ruled his mind alternately, and neither seemed quite strong enough to hold him. What should be added on the one side or the other to end the contest?

At length, having dwelt for some time upon his forlorn condition, he seemed to come to a decision; and, suddenly seizing his hat, he said:

"I'll do it! I've got to, or starve!" He was about to seek the office of his uncle's friend, when, suddenly, he stopped. His steps were arrested, not by a voice—he did not even fancy that he heard a voice—but as plainly as if they were printed upon the wall before him, he saw the words: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." It was the very text that, printed in colors, hung opposite his desk in the old school-room at home. After that he did not say, even to himself, what he meant to do.

He went about the room picking up the few articles that belonged to him; he wrote a note to the gentleman who had made him the offer; then he went down to his aunt's room and bade her good-bye, making no explanation beyond saying that he had suddenly determined to leave the city.

He asked his uncle to express his regrets to his uncle that he could not wait for his return, and walked out of the house feeling that a great burden was off his mind. But where to go, he had yet to decide. He walked on, carrying his light bag; walked far beyond the limits of the city; he walked rapidly, as he were trying to get away from something. And so he was—trying to get away from the great temptation! Now and then, as he looked back and saw the spires of the city receding, he chuckled to himself, and then would come the soberer thought of what the future might have for him. It grew dark. Something must be done. He had less than one dollar; but he must have a place to sleep. It began to rain. This decided his next move. He could not afford to ruin the only coat he had, so he walked around to the side-door of a pleasant looking farm-house and rapped. The farmer himself opened the door and invited him in. Stepping inside out of the rain, Philip said:

"I'm suddenly turned into a tramp; but, unlike others of my sort, I do not relish the prospect of a night in the rain, even under the friendly shelter of the haystack, so I have stopped to ask shelter and something to eat."

The host looked keenly at the visitor, and, as he afterward said, concluding it was a good face, said:

"I presume you can be accommodated. I'll speak to my wife!" and he led the way into the family sitting-room saying:

"Mary, here is a stranger, who would like some supper and a room for the night."

"Oh, no, no supper! just a bowl of milk or a piece of bread," was the quick rejoinder of the tramp, who remembering the state of his finances, reflected that he could not afford supper; so he added, "I assure you that will be sufficient; I wish to make no trouble."

Presently, refreshed by his bowl of milk and a generous supply of bread and butter, which his hostess quickly set before him, Mr. Stuart accepted the invitation to join the group about the open fire, which the cool autumn evening made a great comfort, and set about making himself agreeable; and in his own mind a plan was springing up which he thought he saw a chance of bringing about. He smiled to himself as he thought of it, and of how it contrasted with

the ambitions of the past; but to night chilled and weary, and with a prospect before him of hunger and weariness yet to be endured, he thought that to be the chore-boy of this plain young farmer, and to have such a luxurious supper every night, to say nothing of the privilege of sitting before that cheerful fire, ought to satisfy any reasonable young fellow. And, inspired partly by this hope and partly by the desire of giving pleasure for the favors shown him, he exerted himself to be entertaining, and Philip Stuart knew how to do it. He was a good talker and a good story-teller; and the young farmer and his wife were charmed with their guest thus strangely thrust upon them. And they would have smiled too at the thought of his aspiring to be a chore-boy. But something more to his taste was waiting for him. In the course of the evening a neighbor came in. Being introduced as a stranger, Philip found it an opportunity to give his name, and also to mention that he was the nephew of Thomas Stuart, of the firm of "Stuart & Meigs."

The talk between the neighbors drifted on through all the range of neighborhood topics, until, finally, they came to the object of the call. It appeared to the listener that the teacher who had been engaged for the winter term of school in that district had been obliged to resign the position on account of protracted illness; and Philip's host and the caller, Mr. Holmes, holding the office of trustees, were obliged to fill the vacancy. Surely, if Philip had been a believer in Providential interposition, he would have recognized in the events of that day and evening an illustration of the truth so precious to believers; but as yet he did not acknowledge the Hand that was holding him back in the hour of danger, delivering him from temptation and leading him out of his difficulties by a safe and honorable path.

After listening to the talk for a time, he said: "Gentlemen, if I can give you satisfactory credentials will I stand any chance of obtaining the vacant position?"

"I do not know why you would not stand as good a chance as any one," replied Mr. Martin.

"I have some documents with me which may give you a degree of confidence in me, and I shall be glad to refer you to people whom you must know, at least, by reputation." And he passed to the gentlemen two or three letters of introduction, one from his college president.

"Are you really in earnest?" asked Mr. Holmes, handing back the letters after perusal.

"I certainly am very much in earnest," was the reply.

"But the salary is very small, and you ought to fill a better place. I do not understand," said his host.

"But I haven't found the better place; and I have decided to take the first that offers, if it should be respectable. You may smile, but half an hour ago, hearing of my friend here say that he needed a chore boy, I had made up my mind to apply for the situation."

At this the gentlemen laughed, and Philip continued:

"The simple truth is, I graduated with an almost empty pocket; and very soon after I had a long sickness, which not only exhausted my finances and left me in debt, but threw me out of a position, as full work had begun before I was off my bed; and so it happens that I am without a place and without money, and glad to take up with small things."

After some further talk Mr. Holmes arose to go; Mr. Wilson accompanied him to the door, which gave them an opportunity for a word in private.

"Well, Wilson, what do you think of that young fellow in there?"

"Why, it looks as if he might be all straight. You say you are going into the city in a day or two; you may as well stop in at Stuart & Meigs' and ask about him."

"Yes; but what about opening school to-morrow? You know word has been given out that the place would be supplied then."

"W-h-e-l!" said Mr. Wilson, hesitating. "Suppose we let him go in! I reckon he is all right."

"I declare, I believe I'll risk it," returned the other. "You talk a little more with him, and if he keeps a straight story, let him go in. I'll trust you to find him out between now and to-morrow morning at nine o'clock."

"If those letters are genuine he is all right; and I don't know as we have any reason to doubt about them."

CHAPTER II.

When the senior partner of the firm of Stuart & Meigs learned of his nephew's rejection of the position offered him, he was, as Philip had foreseen, very angry.

"I'm done with the upstart!" he said; "he need not expect to be tolerated in my house any longer! I'll give him to understand that the sooner he looks out for other quarters, the better I shall be pleased."

But when, upon reaching home, he found the young man had accepted his dismissal, and had already sought other quarters, it seemed doubtful if he was altogether pleased. He had missed the opportunity of pouring out his wrath upon the young fellow who had dared to set his advice, and what he was pleased to call service, at naught, and in that he was disappointed. It would have been a great relief to him to have been able to give his nephew a piece of his mind. As it was, he could only blame his wife for letting Philip go off before he had a chance to "bring him to reason."

Mrs. Stuart would have excused Philip, who was a favorite of hers; but he would hear nothing in favor of the ungrateful scamp, and declared he would never speak to him again, and he would recommend young Morgan for the place which had been recklessly thrown away. Young Morgan was Mrs. Stuart's nephew, but he had never been much in favor with her husband.

"Philip will be back to apologize and beg for the place before the week is out," he said, "and I want to get some one in before he comes. I'll never help him to a crumb, if he starves!" And this promise he bound with an oath.

But he was mistaken. Neither within a week, nor even in the future, did Philip Stuart find it necessary to ask favors of his uncle. However, that gentleman did him a favor without knowing or meaning it. It was when Mr. Holmes called to make inquiries as to the character and standing of Philip Stuart, whom they had hired to teach the school, and who, he said, was winning favor.

"The upstart!" exclaimed Mr. Stuart. "Yes, the imprudent puppy is my nephew, or was before I disowned him; and a more unlikable, pig-headed fellow never lived! Fact is, he has been spoiled, flattered, until he has come to think that he knows a little more than any of us old heads; and when a fellow gets to that point it is time he was turned out to shift for himself! I'll have nothing more to do with him! I don't wish to hear his name!" And with this angry growling he turned to his account book.

But Mr. Holmes was not satisfied. He wished to know more of this matter. He had a son and a daughter in the school, and he was anxious to learn as much as possible about the young man who had been put in charge, and notwithstanding he understood himself dismissed, he pushed his inquiries in the face of his dismissal!

"I beg pardon, but I wish to ask one or two more questions."

The merchant turned impatiently toward him:

"Well?"

"Not at all daunted, Mr. Holmes continued:

"Would you consider your nephew an unsafe person to teach our children?"

"Humph!" was the growling exclamation. Mr. Stuart seemed to find relief in growling. "That depends upon whether you care as to what sort of notions he puts into their heads. If you are all fanatics together, as conceived as he is in thinking that you can manage things a little better than any one else, why, he will suit you. The fact is, sir, my nephew—as you insist upon calling him, though I disown him—is a fool!" And in no very gentle tones nor polite terms he told the story of Philip Stuart's refusal of the splendid opening he had been at pains to secure him, saying, in conclusion:

"There you have him! Whether or not he is the sort of person to introduce into your community of hop-growers, you are the best judge."

"I understand," said Mr. Holmes, when the story was ended. "I think I know the fellow. I am very much obliged to you for having opened my eyes. Good morning, sir."