

QUINCE, AND HOW THE LORD LED HIM.

(By Miss L. Bates.)

CHAPTER XVI.

A DAY IN THE RAVINE.

Mr. Dibell took an early opportunity to come to "The Farm," as the few acres that Mr. Chase himself cultivated were called. The farm proper was a mile away, and it was a grand sight to see them reap and bind, the man on the seat of the reaper driving his handsome horses, with the grain falling and the men binding, all done with the accuracy of machinery and the seemingly easy movement of skilled labor.

Quince had been over several times, but his work was not there. He was glad of that; it suited him to follow Mr. Chase in late ploughing and scattering seed. Then the hay in the meadow was cut with a scythe, and wheat was reaped with a cradle.

Wherever Quince went Merry and Aline were sure to follow; and when Mr. Dibell came out to spend a day with them, Mrs. Chase and Olive joined them.

The ravine offered rare attractions as they wound down by the bridge, over the moss and the lichened rocks, gathering flowers and tearing their dresses, with laughter and chatting, a fragment from some old poet or a snatch of song that set the birds going.

Quince cut poles and nockets were ransacked for twine and fish-hooks. It was all too minute for ordinary fishing-tackle, and the trout knew it, perhaps, as they glided here and there under the grassy bank and among the tree-roots, but never venturing into smooth water.

When there were fish enough caught for a meal, a fire was kindled on the bank; pronged sticks were set in real gipsy fashion, with water boiling in an iron kettle. Then, spreading the live coals, the trout were nicely browned, and the fragrance of the steaming coffee brought Mr. Chase to join them. Quince had not bargained for this kind of life, but it was his—his enjoyment of listening to speech that showed a just appreciation of God's works and God's goodness. Then the children gathered clusters of pink roses, golden honeysuckle, and fleecy dandelions, Mr. Chase finding ferns, of which he had a variety at home, and of which he never seemed to tire.

Quince wondered if every ravine held so many beautiful things, and why it was that so many men, and women, too, failed to see the exquisite design and finish that flashed before Mr. Dibell's eyes and led him to talk so eloquently of leaf and stalk and blossom, each having its distinct life and purpose in the great plan of God's unfolding.

Merry came running to know if his mother had brought the microscope; he had discovered some rare moss, and the cups would be worth seeing. From some hidden recess Mr. Dibell produced one.

"It is an old habit of mine," he said; "I like to bring a magnifying-glass to bear upon everything. Thus I get a better understanding of the truth, and my ideas are enlarged."

Merry's face was full of expectation. "Come, he said to Quince, who accordingly drew near; while Aline cuddled up by the side of Mr. Dibell as he showed them the jewelled cups.

Then a blade of grass was taken, with the countless army of infinitesimal life running along the green fibres.

"I don't like it, the beautiful green grass. It is not clean; I can never roll on it again," exclaimed Aline, with flashing eyes.

Mr. Dibell slipped his glass aside. Aline was puzzled.

"Where are they?" she cried. "Where have they hidden away?"

"They are there all the same, but we cannot see them," was the reply.

"Many of us are like Aline," laughed Mr. Chase; "we cannot bear to have our preconceived ideas interfered with. We would rather look into the moss-cups or examine the feathers on a fly's wing. Aline did not cry out at these."

"But, papa, there were so many ugly creeping things," said the child, not quite relishing the laugh.

The talk ran out on the scenery and the flora of other sections of the country; it was more or less interesting to Quince, and suggestive of studies to which he was yet an entire stranger.

At length there was a breaking of dry twigs, and Merry rushed up with a butterfly

he had captured, a magnificent specimen with wings of black and gold.

"Oh, Merry, how could you?" cried Aline.

"But I never hurt him," was the quick reply.

"Any way, I don't believe it was right," came stoutly from Aline.

"I don't believe it was wrong," said Merry, with emphasis. "We've got a microscope, and now we must have things to look at. I thought you'd be glad of this," he continued, with a little concession in his tone.

Mr. Dibell drew a letter from his pocket and improvised a box for the captive. Good feeling was at once re-established.

"Shall we fish going back?" Quince asked.

"The day is too far spent for that," answered Mr. Chase.

Quince left the rods where he could find them again, securing the hooks and placing the twine in his pocket.

The small group had broken up into irregular parties. Mr. Chase was walking up and down the bank quite by himself.

"I used to come here with Robert," he said to Quince, who joined him. "He was fond of trouting, and many a Saturday afternoon we have spent here."

There was something pathetic in the voice, so unlike the gay, lively banter of the hour previous. Quince was saddened, as much by the lonely attitude of the man walking up and down the bank with his hat drooped over his eyes and his hands clasped behind his back as by his words. True, he could not remember spending Saturday afternoons with his father in this way, but it must have been very pleasant for any one who had had the chance to do so. Robert had known a beautiful child life, and he was never saddened by painful memories.

When the stricken father spoke again, there was the calm of resignation in the voice:

"The boy filled up the measure of his life as God would have him to do. It seemed strange to me; I felt that I could not bear it, and his mother was well-nigh broken-hearted. It is different now; it was God who did it, and all he does is for the best."

Quince looked up brightly; there was strength in Mr. Chase's words, and almost a smile on his face. "God who did it." Yes, he knew what it was to rest here. It was God's law; and, let it fall where it would, God's law must be accomplished.

Glad voices were heard farther up the stream, and the children came running in great glee; they had found a light board, and they called it a boat and freighted it with moss and flowers, laughing to see it float down the brook.

"A Nile-boat, if we had made a top to it," Merry shouted.

"As well that as anything," said his father.

Others were coming in. Mrs. Chase was a little in advance, a sweet seriousness in her face, and silent. Was she too thinking of other days, when she had followed up the brook with her boy, gazing into the rippling water and drawing out the silvery trout; and of the camp fire and the enjoyment of sitting around the impromptu table? Quince thought it probable as he caught the expression of her face.

Going home through the dusky openings, there were few words said. Merry had lost his boat and Aline was thoroughly tired.

Quince was walking in advance. There was still work for him to do. He had enjoyed it all, but he had not found the desired opportunity to speak with Mr. Dibell and seek an answer to the question he had intended to ask. He had thought it would be easy to do so when the others were occupied. But it would not be easy now for him to ask the question. And was there any real need of asking? Yet it seemed that he must ask; he must talk freely to Mr. Dibell, and he would be sure to know whether a life of love and trust could ever be by any possibility for him. His mother was a good woman; was there in the Bible a promise to one who had been taught as Timothy was taught, to honor God? But the next moment he was saddened by the thought that it was plainly written, "The iniquity of the fathers upon the children."

The sun was nearly set when they climbed up the tangled path by the bridge and then went on to the house.

"If I do your work, will you do mine?" Mr. Chase asked Quince.

"What is that?"

"Harness the horses and take Mr. Dibell into the village."

It was the very thing Quince had wanted to do; and while his hands deftly fastened buckles and straps he was bringing his thoughts into order and shaping his questions. Possibly the answer would lay upon him an additional burden; but he must bear himself, always remembering to love and honor his mother's God.

Bringing the horses to the door and then running up to his room to freshen himself, he slipped his small Bible into his pocket, with the precise passage marked, so that he might turn to it quickly. Then, running down the stairs, he was surprised to find Mr. and Mrs. Chase about to enter the carriage with Mr. Dibell.

"I had forgotten that I promised to go to the village to-night. You will find the new book on the table, and will not be disappointed, I hope," Mr. Chase said to Quince as he reached out for the reins.

The lad bowed slightly, he was aiseartened, for he had promised himself a long quiet talk with Mr. Dibell.

The latter was coming down the steps. He had lingered to say a word to Olive, and now he was seemingly in haste. Before he entered the carriage, however, he took Quince by the hand:

"We have had a charming day. I have enjoyed it, and I am coming again; then we must have our drive together. Don't forget."

As the horses struck into the road Quince darted away to the barn, there to shed a few tears silently, and there to again resolve to bear up bravely. After all, perhaps it was not right for him to speak of his father in the way and manner in which he would be obliged to speak of him if once the subject was opened. This thought comforted him. His father would have been a good man but for the sin that shut him and his children out from the kingdom of God.

CHAPTER XVII.

A RIDF WITH MR. DIBELL.

Mr. Scago had sent a letter that made it necessary for Quince to return a week earlier than was expected.

"I wish you wouldn't go, Quince," exclaimed Merry; and the next instant he was clinging to the lad's hand. "It's just as though Rob was with us since you've been here. Why can't you stay always?" with pleading tenderness.

"Would you like me to stay?" Quince asked, affected by the appeal.

"Of course. We all want you to stay—Don't we, mother?" turning to Mrs. Chase.

"If it would be best for Quince, we would want him to stay," was the reply.

"It will be the best thing for him. He's quite as much at home here as any of us," said the boy with childlike insistence.

"Quince came here for his vacation; when school reopens, he must go back. He must study, so as to make himself a man and prepare himself to fill a man's place in the world. And when you are as old as he is, you will have to study in order to fill a worthy station in life," said Mrs. Chase, drawing the boy to her side.

"I shan't want to leave you, mother; I never shan't want to leave you. And I don't want Quince to go away either," hiding his face in her lap.

And now came one of the most silent moments full of action and significance, the boy weeping and the mother lifting the short brown curls and letting them slip one by one through her slim fingers. Then she said, bowing her head over him gently,

"Instead of feeling badly because Quince is to leave us, let us do what we can to send him back to Chelmsford comfortable for the winter. Can you think of any way in which we can do this?"

"We can give him things to take with him; we can give him some of Rob's books," was the quick reply.

"Yes; that is one way."

"And we can tell him he can come and stay the next vacation."

"Yes; that is another way."

"We can write to Mr. Scago and tell him that Quince is one of us and we've the best right to him."

"Yes; this is still another way."

"I can't think of another," lifting his head, "unless it's to be cheerfuller all the time."

"To be happy and smiling all the time. Is this it?"

"You always know what I mean, mother. It seems to me 'cheerfuller' is a good word for it."

This return a week earlier, together with the loss of the week at Mr. Jethro's, which Quince regarded as wasted, made the vacation seem all too short.

"I shall get another boy for winter," Mr. Chase said. "I cannot get along without a boy to whistle; things go smoother. As a general thing a boy who can whistle, and does whistle, is worth double one who can't and never tries to."

Mr. Chase was serious; he was evidently thinking of some particular boy's whistling.

"Rob could whistle anything; he was always whistling," spoke up Merry. "I can whistle, can't I, father?" at the same time making a practical exhibition of his ability.

"So can I whistle," exclaimed Aline, anxious to be able to do whatever merry could do.

"Not a very desirable accomplishment for girls," said her father smiling.

"It's nice, though."

"Did you ever hear your mother whistle?"

"Don't believe ever I did." Then, turning with flushed cheeks to her mother,

"Isn't it nice for girls to whistle?"

"It sounds better for birds and boys to whistle, because they live a great deal more in the open air; girls live more in the house," was the answer.

"I know," going over to her father.

"Outdoors anybody can whistle, and I'm outdoors just as much as Merry is."

A smile curved the bearded lips, but there was nothing further said of whistling.

The Sunday following, Merry was the first to inform Mr. Dibell that Quince was to go away; and the young pastor came over the next day for another ramble through the ravine. Mrs. Chase did not join them, and the children must have poles and a lunch-basket. Quince found his hands full, and there was not a moment for a word of all those things he wanted so much to say. It seemed as if an opportunity would never be afforded.

The extent of the ravine did not offer new walks; they visited the same nooks and dropped their lines into the same clear pools as upon their former visit.

As for the trout were, they managed to secure enough to make a royal meal. Added to the fish, they had potatoes roasted in the ashes, with apples baked on the hot stones. It was the same ravine, yet the last growth of summer was brown and crisp and dust-covered.

Mr. Dibell had brought his microscope, and Merry, who had a way of monopolizing persons and things, was busy bringing weeds and flowers to be examined.

"One would never take so much time with common things," he said, after looking admiringly at some tiny seed-vessels.

"Our best workmen do not always make things equally perfect; but God finishes even a weed with the most perfect exactness, so that it stands complete in beauty after its kind, as exquisite in its moulding as the most precious flower," Mr. Dibell replied.

Then followed one of those moments when it seemed to Quince that he could talk with the freedom of one who longed for knowledge. But could he speak of his father before Olive? and would it not be selfish to induce Mr. Dibell to listen to what it was not intended for another to hear? He was saddened beyond measure with the thought that he might have to go away without the coveted opportunity.

Meantime, Mr. Dibell was talking in a general way of the wonderful mechanism of minute objects too small to be seen with the naked eye; then he touched upon the telescope, which made plain to the eye of man distant fields of space and revealed worlds in countless numbers.

"These are the works of God," he said, reverently. "Now, more than the microscope reveals of his perfect exactness; and more than the telescope brings before us of the wonderful creations of his power,—does the Bible tell us of his character, of his glorious majesty, and above all of his loving-kindness to the children of men."

Then, so turning his glass that it covered the inner lining of a broken capsule, the children were called to look at what they said appeared to them to be a nest.

"Yes, it is a nest for the seed, and it is beautifully lined," was the answer.

Mr. Dibell slipped the instrument into the case, and the case into his pocket. At the same time he said,

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