

THE SEXTON'S HERO.

BY COTTON MATHER MILLS, ESQ.

The afternoon sun shed down his glorious rays on the grassy churchyard, making the shadow cast by the old yew tree under which we sat seem deeper and deeper by contrast.

Of the view that lay beneath our gaze, I cannot speak adequately. The foreground was the grey stone wall of the vicarage garden; rich in the coloring made by innumerable lichens, ferns, ivy of most tender green, and most delicate tracery, and the vivid scarlet of the crane's-bill, which found a home in every nook and crevice—and at the summit of that old wall

For a while we were silent, living in sight, and murmuring sound. Then Jeremy took up our conversation where, suddenly feeling weariness, as we saw that deep green shadow resting place, we had ceased speaking, a quarter of an hour before.

It is one of the luxuries of holiday time that thought is not rudely shaken from us by outward violence of hurry, and busy impatience, but falls naturally from our lips in the sunny leisure of our days.

"How then would you define a hero?" "There was a long pause, and I had almost forgotten my question in watching a cloud shadow floating over the far-away hills, when Jeremy made answer:

"My idea of a hero, is one who acts up to the highest idea of duty he has been able to form, no matter at what sacrifice. I think that by this definition, we may include all phases of the character, even to the heroes of old, whose (and to us, low) idea of duty consisted in personal prowess."

"Then you would even admit the military heroes?" asked I.

"I would, with a certain kind of pity for the circumstances which had given them no higher ideas of duty. Still if they sacrificed to do what they sincerely believed to be right, I do not think I could deny them the title of hero."

"A poor, unchristian heroism, whose manifestation consists in injury to others!" I said.

"We were both startled by a third voice: "If I might make so bold, sir,"—and then the speaker stopped.

It was the sexton, whom, when we first arrived, we had noticed, as an accessory to the scene, but whom we had forgotten as much as though he were as inanimate as one of the moss-covered headstones.

"If I might be so bold," said he again, awaiting leave to speak. Jeremy bowed in deference to his white, uncovered head. And so encouraged, he went on:

"What that gentleman" (alluding to my last speech) "has just now said, brings to my mind one who is dead and gone this many a year ago. I may be have not rightly understood your meaning, gentlemen, but as far as I could gather it, I think you'd both have given rise to thinking poor Gilbert Dawson a hero. At any rate," said he, heaving a long quivering sigh, "I have reason to think him so."

"Will you take a seat, sir, and tell us about him?" said Jeremy, standing up until the old man was seated. I confess I felt impatient at the interruption.

"It will be forty-five years come Martinmas," said the sexton, sitting down on a grassy mound at our feet, "since I had finished my apprenticeship, and settled down at Lindal. You can see Lindal, sir, at evenings and mornings, across the bay; a little to the right of Grange; at least, I used to see it many a time and oft, afore my sight grew so dark; and I have spent many a quarter of an hour a-gazing at it far away, and thinking of the days I lived there, till the tears came so thick to my eyes, I could gaze no longer. I shall never look on it again, either far off or near, but you may see it both ways, and a terrible bonny spot it is:—in my young days, when I went to settle there, it was full of as wild a set of young fellows as ever were clapped eyes on; all for fighting, poaching, quarrelling, and such like work. I was startled myself when I first found what a set I were among, but soon I began to fall into their ways, and I ended by being as rough a chap as any on 'em. I'd been there a matter of two year, and were reckoned by most the cock of the village, when Gilbert Dawson, as I was speaking of, came to Lindal. He was about as strapping a chap as I was, (I used to be six feet high, though now I'm no shrunken and doubled up), and as we were like in the same trade, (both used to prepare oysters and wood for the Liverpool coopers, who get a great deal of stuff from the coopers round the bay, sir), we were thrown together, and took mighty to each other. I put my best leg foremost to be equal with Gilbert, for I'd had some schooling, though since I'd been at Lindal I'd lost a good part of what I learnt; and I kept my rough ways out of sight for a time, I felt so ashamed of his getting to know them. But that did not last long; I began to think he fancied a girl I dearly loved but who had always held off from me. Eh! but she was a pretty one in those days! There's none like her now. I think I see her going along the road with her dancing tread, and shaking back her long yellow curls, to give me or any other young fellow a saucy word; no wonder Gilbert was taken with her, for all he was so grave, and she so merry and light. But I began to think she liked him again; and then my blood was all afire. I got to hate him for everything he did. Aforetime I had stood by, admiring to see him, how he leapt, and what a quoter and cricketer he was. And now I ground my teeth with hatred whenever he did a thing which caught Letty's eye. I could read it in her eye that she liked him, for all she held herself just as high with him as with all the rest.—Lord God forgive me! how I hated that man!"

"I spoke as if the hatred were a thing of yesterday so clear within his memory were shown the actions and feelings of his youth. And then he dropped his voice, and said:

"Well! I began to look out to pick a quarrel with him! for my blood was up to fight him. If I beat him, (and I were a rare boxer in those days), I thought Letty would cool towards him. So one evening at quilts, (I'm sure I don't know how or why, but large doings grow out of small words), I fell out with him, and challenged him to fight. I could see that he was very wroth by his colour coming and going—and as I said before he was a fine active young fellow. But all at once he drew in, and said he would not fight. Such a yell as the Lindal lads, who were watching us, set up I hear it yet; I could na' help but feel sorry for him, he was so scorned, and I thought he'd not rightly taken my meaning, and I'd give him another chance; so I said it again, and dared him, as plain as words could speak, to fight out the quarrel. He told me he had had no quarrel against me; that he might have said something to put me up; he did not know that he had but that if he had he asked my pardon; but that he would not fight no-how."

"I was so full of scorn at his cowardliness, that I was vexed I'd given him the second chance, and I joined in the yell that was set up, twice as loud as before. He stood it up, his teeth set, and looking very white, and when we were silent for want of breath, he said out loud, but in a hoarse voice, quite different from his own:

"I cannot fight, because I think it's wrong to quarrel, and use violence." "Then he turned to go away; I were so beside myself with scorn and hate, that I called out:

"Tell truth, lad, at least, if you dare not fight, dimwit go and tell a lie about it. Mother's moppet is afraid of a black eye, pretty dear. It shan't be hurt but it mustn't tell lies."

"Well, they laughed, but I could not laugh. It seemed such a thing for a stout young chap to be a coward, and afraid!"

"Before the sun had set, it was talked of all over Lindal, how I had challenged Gilbert to fight, and how he'd denied me: and the folks stood at the doors and looked at him going up the hill to his home, as if he had been a monkey, or a foreigner—but no one wished him good 'e'en. Such a thing as refusing to fight had never been heard of afore at Lindal. Next day, however, they had found voice. The men uttered the word 'coward' in his hearing, all kept aloof; the women tittered as he passed, and the little impudent lads and lasses shouted out, 'How long is it sin' thou turned Quaker?' 'Good-bye, Jonathan Broad-brim,' and such like jests.

"That evening I met him, with Letty by his side, coming up from the shore. She was almost crying as I came upon them at the turn of the lane; and looking up in his face as if begging him something. And so she was; she told me it after. For she did really like him; and could not abide to hear him scorned by every one for being a coward; and she coy as she was all but told him that very night that she loved him, and begged him not to disgrace himself, but fight me, as I'd dared him to. When he still stuck to it that he could not for it was wrong, she was so vexed and mad-like at the way she'd spoken, and the feelings she'd let out to coax him that she said more stinging things about his being a coward than all the rest put together, (according to what she told me, sir, afterwards), and ended by saying she'd never speak to him again, as long as she lived!—she did once again though her ear was the last human speech that reached his ear in his wild death-struggle.

"But what happened afore that time. From the day I met them walking, Letty turned towards me; I could see a part of it was to spite Gilbert, for she'd be twice as kind when he was near, or likely to hear of it; but by-and-by she got to like me for my own sake, and it was all settled for our marriage. Gilbert kept aloof from every one, and fell into a sad careless way. His very gait was changed, his step used to be brisk and bounding, and now his foot lingered heavily on the ground. I used to try to daunt him with my eye, but he would always meet my look in a steady, quiet way, for all so much about him was altered; the lads would not play with him; and as soon as he found he was to be slighted by them whenever he came to quiting, or cricket he just left off coming.

"The old clerk was the only one he kept company with; or perhaps, rightly to speak, the only one who would keep company with him. They got so thick at last, that old Jonas used say Gilbert had Gospel on his side, and did no more than gossip told him to do; but none of us gave much credit to what he said, more by token our vicar had a brother, a colonel in the army; and as we threeped it many a time to Jonas, would he set himself up to know the gospel better than the vicar? that would be putting cart afore horse, like the French radicals. And if the vicar had thought quarrelling and fighting wicked, and again the Bible, would he have made so much work about all the victories, that were as plenty as blackberries at that time of day, and kept the little bell of Lindal Church forever ringing; or would he have thought so much of 'my brother the colonel,' as he was always talking on.

"After I was married to Letty I left off hating Gilbert. I even kind of pitied him; he was so scorned and slighted; and for all he'd a bold look about him, as if he were not ashamed; he seemed pining and shrank. It's a wearing thing to be kept at arm's length by one's kind; and so Gilbert took it, poor fellow. The little children took to him, though they'd be round about him like a swarm of bees;—them as was too young to know what a coward was, and only felt that he was ever ready to love and help them, and was never loud or cross; however naughty they might be. Afore a while we had our little one too; such a blessed darling she was, and dearly did we love her; Letty in especial, who seemed to get all the thought I used to think sometimes she wanted, after she had her baby to care for.

"All my kin lived on this side the bay, up above Kellet. Jane (that's her that lies buried near your white rose tree) was to be married, and nought would serve her but that Letty and I must come to the wedding; for all my sisters loved Letty, she had such winning ways with her. Letty did not like to leave her talk, nor yet did I want her to take it; so after a while, we fixed to leave it with Letty's mother for the afternoon. I could see her heart ached a bit, for she'd never left it till then, and she seemed to fear all manner of evil, even to the French coming and taking it away. Well! we borrowed a shandy, and harnessed my old grey mare, as I used in 't' cart, and set off as our grand as King George across the Sands about three o'clock, for you see it were high water about twelve, and we'd to go and come back same tide, as Letty could not leave her baby for long. It were a merry afternoon, were that;—last time I ever saw Letty laugh heartily; and for that matter the last time I ever laughed downright hearty myself. The latest crossing time fell about nine o'clock, and we were late at starting. Clocks were wrong; and we'd a piece of work chasing a pig father had given Letty to take home; we bagged him at last, and he screeched and screeched in the back part of shandy, and we laughed and they laughed; and in the midst of all the merriment the sun set, and that sobered us a bit, for then we knew what time it was. I whipped the old mare, but she was a deal keener than she was in the morning, and would neither go quick nor down the brow, and they're not a few 'twixt Kellet and the shore.—On the sands it were worse. They were very heavy, and for the fresh had come down after the rains we'd had. Lord! how I did whip the poor mare, to make the most of the red light as yet lasted. You, maybe, don't know the Sands, gentlemen. From Bolton-side, where we started from, it's better than six miles to Cart-lane, and two channels to cross, let alone holes and quick-sands. At the second channel from us the guide waits all during crossing time from sunrise to sunset; but for the three hours on each side high water, he's not there, in course. He stays after sunset if he's fore-spoken, not else. So now you know where we were that awful night. For we'd crossed the first channel about two mile, and it were growing darker and darker above and around us, all but one red line of light above the hills, when we came to a hollow (for all the Sands look so flat, there's many a hollow in them where you lose all sight of the shore.) We were longer than we should have been in crossing the hollow, the sand was so quick; and when we came up again, there, again the blackness, was the white line of the rushing tide coming up the bay. It looked not a mile from us; and when the wind blew up the bay, it comes swifter than a galloping horse. 'Lord help us!' said I, and then I were sorry I'd spoken, my heart, and I thought he'd not rightly taken my meaning, and I'd give him another chance; so I said it again, and dared him, as plain as words could speak, to fight out the quarrel. He told me he had had no quarrel against me; that he might have said something to put me up; he did not know that he had but that if he had he asked my pardon; but that he would not fight no-how."

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"And then she sent up such a cry—so loud, and shrill and pitiful! It fairly maddened me. I pulled out my knife to spur on the old mare, that it might end one way or the other, for the water was stealing sullenly up to the very axle-tree, let alone the white waves that knew no mercy in their steady advance.—That one quarter of an hour, sir, seemed as long as all my life since. Thoughts, and fancies, and dreams, and memory, ran into each other. The mist, the heavy mist, that was like a ghastly curtain, shutting us in for death, seemed to bring with it the scents of the flowers that grew round our own threshold.—It might be, for it was falling on them like blessed dew, though to us it was a shroud. Letty told me, after, she heard her baby crying for her, above the gurgle of the tiding waters, as plain as ever she heard any thing; but the sea birds were skirling, and the pig shrieking—I never caught it; it was miles away at any rate.

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"I was so full of scorn at his cowardliness, that I was vexed I'd given him the second chance, and I joined in the yell that was set up, twice as loud as before. He stood it up, his teeth set, and looking very white, and when we were silent for want of breath, he said out loud, but in a hoarse voice, quite different from his own:

"I cannot fight, because I think it's wrong to quarrel, and use violence." "Then he turned to go away; I were so beside myself with scorn and hate, that I called out:

"Tell truth, lad, at least, if you dare not fight, dimwit go and tell a lie about it. Mother's moppet is afraid of a black eye, pretty dear. It shan't be hurt but it mustn't tell lies."

"And then she sent up such a cry—so loud, and shrill and pitiful! It fairly maddened me. I pulled out my knife to spur on the old mare, that it might end one way or the other, for the water was stealing sullenly up to the very axle-tree, let alone the white waves that knew no mercy in their steady advance.—That one quarter of an hour, sir, seemed as long as all my life since. Thoughts, and fancies, and dreams, and memory, ran into each other. The mist, the heavy mist, that was like a ghastly curtain, shutting us in for death, seemed to bring with it the scents of the flowers that grew round our own threshold.—It might be, for it was falling on them like blessed dew, though to us it was a shroud. Letty told me, after, she heard her baby crying for her, above the gurgle of the tiding waters, as plain as ever she heard any thing; but the sea birds were skirling, and the pig shrieking—I never caught it; it was miles away at any rate.

"Just as I'd gotten my knife out, another sound was close upon us, blending with the gurgle of the near waters, and the roar of the distant; (not so distant though!) we could hardly see, but we thought we saw something black against the deep lead colour of wave, and mist, and sky. It neared, and neared; with slow, steady motion it came across the channel right to where we were. O God! it was Gilbert Dawson on his strong bay horse.

"Few words did we speak, and little time had we to say them in. I had no knowledge at that time of past or future—only of present thought—how to save Letty, and, if I could, myself. I only remembered afterwards that Gilbert said he had been guided by an animal's shriek of terror. I only heard, when all was over, that he had been uneasy about our return, because of the depth of fresh; and had borrowed a pig, and saddled his horse early in the evening, and ridden down to Cart lane to watch for us. If all had gone well, we should never have heard of it. As it was, old Jonas told it, the tears down-dropping from his withered cheeks.

"We fastened his horse to the shanty. We lifted Letty to the pillow. The waters rose every instant with a sullen sound. They were all but in the shanty. Letty clung to the pillow handless, but drooped her head as if she had yet no hope of life.

"Swifter than thought, (and yet he might have had time for thought and for temptation, sir;—if he had ridden off with Letty he would have been saved—not me.) Gilbert was in the shanty by his side.

"'Quick!' said he, clear and firm. 'You must ride before her, and keep her. The horse can swim. By God's mercy I will follow. I can cut the traces, and if the mare is not hampered with the shanty, she'll carry me safely through. At any rate, you are a husband and a father. No one cares for me!'"

"Do not hate me gentlemen. I often wish that night was a dream. It has haunted my sleep ever since like a dream; and yet it was no dream. I took his place on the saddle, and put Letty's arms around me, and felt her head rest on my shoulder. I trust in God the horse, like the French radicals. And if the vicar had thought quarrelling and fighting wicked, and again the Bible, would he have made so much work about all the victories, that were as plenty as blackberries at that time of day, and kept the little bell of Lindal Church forever ringing; or would he have thought so much of 'my brother the colonel,' as he was always talking on.

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