

QUINCE, AND HOW THE LORD LED HIM.

(By Miss L. Bates.)

CHAPTER XII.

THE TAVERN-KEEPER'S OFFER REFUSED.

Quince packed his bundle, taking care to slip in as many books as he could conveniently carry. He had taken leave of Esther the night before; so that there was nothing left for him to do or say. He had not thought of breakfast, but there was a bowl of bread and milk standing on the table just by the door through which he must pass. It was like Esther, and tears came into his eyes. He did not feel as if he could swallow a mouthful, but he would not have her come down to find that he had disregarded her wish or failed to appreciate her desire to have him eat something before he set out.

The bowl was returned to the table empty, and the latch was raised. Settling his cap over his forehead, Quince stepped forth firmly. This time it was not his own choice; neither was it the effect of forethought. He was starting out simply because there was no longer any need for him to remain. The person who most desired his services was gone, and his other friend was going. There was no alternative. Possibly he might not find anything better, but he must try.

The sun had not yet risen. For some minutes the boy could not bring his thoughts from Scarborough and his mother's grave. Still, his feet had taken another direction. Hugh Mercer had promised to keep the grave free from weeds, and Rachel would freshen it with violets; and when Grandmamma Evans went to her last sleep she would lie there by the side of his mother. Thus far his mother's Bible had been his guide, and it should continue to be such in the future. If he must suffer in order to satisfy the demands of an offended God, it must be; but it should never be said of him that he wantonly transgressed.

The village was behind him; not once had he suffered himself to look back, for fear his courage would forsake him. Now the fresh green of the hills was flooded with gold; birds were singing in the leafy temples by the wayside, and the tinkle of sheep-bells came from the distant meadows. Small herds of red and dun cows were being driven by boys to the pasture. He could see the brown bars, and could hear the lads calling one to another, as slipping them into place one by one, they started homeward. Farmers were coming into the village with their produce; he had not before thought of them as starting out so early.

The sun was fairly overhead before Quince stopped to take his bearings, so many things had been running through his brain, so many pages had memory opened. Thus the hours passed, and the noonday sun found him near a wood and a babbling stream of water, thoroughly tired and not a little hungry.

Flinging himself down on the fresh young grass, he watched the sparkle of the running brook, breaking away into laughing cascades and miniature falls, leaping, dancing, whirling, then soft and low, whispering to the silvery willows and sending messages to the cowslips and the clover in the fields beyond.

Opening his bundle, Quince took out the bread and cheese that Esther had placed there the night previous, and ate it with relish. Then he scooped up the water with his hands and drank eagerly. The hum of insect life was in the air, and the rippling flow of the brook was soothing. He was drowsy, but it was no time to slumber; and, carefully replacing the remainder of his lunch, he drew out his Latin Reader. He did not allow himself to read more than a page, but this rested him; besides, it would give him something to think about; and lighter-hearted from his rest, he started forward.

It was now the reverse of what it had been in the morning. Then all the farmers' waggons were going in to town; now they were driving home. One of them, coming up with the lad, halted, and his occupant asked him to get in. Very willingly was the invitation accepted.

"Looking for work?" asked the farmer.

"Yes sir," was the brief answer.

"Know much about farming?"

"I know a little about it."

"Enough to drive the cows home, I suppose?" with a chuckle.

"I planted corn and potatoes last spring;

and I cut and hauled wood in the fall after the crops were gathered in. It was on a small scale, however. That is the reason I said I knew a little," returned Quince.

"Oh, I didn't mean to undervalue your knowledge," exclaimed the farmer, feeling that the lad was really hurt. "I thought perhaps you'd been to school. You look like it."

"I have been to school this last winter," was the reply.

"Just so; I kin 'most always tell. Ten to one you've got a book in your kit," laughing good-naturedly.

"I have several books," returned Quince.

"Just so. Now what do you intend to do with 'em?"

"If I find work, I expect to do it in working hours, and then I shall have a few minutes for my book before I sleep."

"I calculate, if you turn to farm-work, you'll be too tired to study. Why, if you read the paper, you'll do well—more than I do."

"There was no reply; Quince was thinking of the possibilities before him. What if he did not find work of any kind? What if it should be farm-work, with not a minute for himself?

The farmer touched up his horses, more from habit than from any desire to go faster.

"Now, if you were a good, stout hand, I could direct you to a place right off. There's a farmer over yonder pointing with his whip. He's a well-to-do man, and he's wanting men bad. I judge you're not strong enough, though."

"Perhaps not," in a low voice.

"He's a man to lay a good deal of stone wall between-times. He keeps his men first rate—gives 'em plenty to eat, and all that—and then he expects a good day's work."

"No; I don't suppose I could lay much of a stone wall," said Quince, in an undertone.

"It's 'most too early for plantin', or I might have a job for you. I wish I had; I'd like right well to give you a turn. But that it is, and you can't wait."

Quince explained that he must get something at once.

"Mostly farmers just here, but there's a village ahead. I wish I was to go further, but I turn here. You see, the horses know they're going home," laughed the farmer as the brutes turned from the main road.

"I am obliged for your kindness. It is not far to the village, you say?"

"Not more than five miles, I reckon. Quite a smart place; some heavy men there. Shouldn't be a bit wonder if you'd suit yourself to a turn."

As the horses trotted away Quince grasped his bundle and started in the direction of the village. True, the ride had rested him, as the farmer said; but five miles was not so easy to get over, especially as he had pushed himself in the morning. The farmhouses were not inviting; doubtless he would do well to keep on to the village. The idea of a "stone wall between-times" dampened his hopes with regard to farm-life.

It was hard work; more than once he was obliged to sit down on a stone by the roadside, so that it was dark and the lamps were burning when he reached the outskirts of the village, which looked at that distance to be something larger than Barnston. The streets were full of people coming and going; it was evidently a wide-awake town.

Quince was so thoroughly exhausted that it was impossible for him to feel other than despondent. The village tavern was well lighted. Dragging his weary feet up the steps, he asked for lodging; and was at once shown into a room that answered for an office and had likewise all the appointments of a regular drinking establishment.

"Do you want supper?" was asked, civilly.

"I am too tired to be hungry; I will go to bed at once, if you please," was the reply.

A small lamp with scarcely any oil in it forlode the idea of looking at a book. After all, it was rest he needed, and sleep that would make him strong for another day.

When Quince went down in the morning, the proprietor of the house gave him a searching glance. At length he said,

"Are you travelling far, lad?"

"I left Barnston yesterday, but I shall not be able to walk so far to-day."

"What takes you on such a journey, if I may be so bold?"

"I started in search of work, and I have not as yet found it."

"Good!" exclaimed the man, rubbing his hands and coming over to where Quince was standing. "I have been looking for about such a lad as you to tend bar. What do you say to stopping with me? You see, I'm for business at once. I'll give fifteen dollars a month and board you, and that'll be more'n you ever got o'ing chores," smiling blandly.

"What led you to think I had been doing chores?" Quince asked.

"Oh, you don't look as if you'd had very much hard work," was the answer. "You have not told me: will you stay for fifteen? Yes, perhaps I'll say sixteen, though I can get some one for less. But somehow I think I'd like you."

"To tend bar?" asked Quince.

"Yes; it's not hard work."

"To stand behind the counter and deal out liquor by the glass to whoever calls for it?" continued Quince.

"That is it, exactly. I see you know all about it."

"I do know how others do it, but I have never attempted it."

"That won't make a particle of difference; you can do it."

"No, I cannot do it," answered Quince, with emphasis.

"And why not, I would like to know?"

"Simply because I do not think it would be right."

"Oh, well, if you can afford to choose your employment! I thought you wanted work, and I wanted a clerk. I offered you good wages, for I fancied I'd like you; but if you can do better, of course it's right for you to do it," with a sinister expression where before there had been a laugh.

"It is not the pay, but the work, that I object to. I could not accept the position for a hundred dollars a month. No, not for the universe would I hand a glass of whiskey over the counter."

"Oh you are one of the good ones, I perceive. Well, you'd best advice right along. The day may come when you won't feel so independent. Most likely, your father took a drop too much and you're afraid of your own shadow," sarcastically.

"You are correct. My father was a hard drinker; he died in a drunken brawl. It broke my mother's heart. She died, and I am here. Do you wonder that I cannot accept of your offer?"

The man had evidently not expected anything like this. He was quite subdued:

"You may be right, boy; I cannot say but I should feel so in your place. I may say, perhaps, there are no hard drinkers in Selma; if there are, they are not my patrons. Drinking is very respectable in our village. The ladies, even, have their wine-parties."

Quince set about making his breakfast of dry bread, when the man suddenly softened into tenderness, said,

"Put up your bread, lad, and have a warm breakfast with us. You will not refuse, if we do sell liquor?" as the lad hesitated.

Quince was too kind-hearted to refuse an honest favor, and at once followed the man to the breakfast-table.

Before the meal was finished the proposition was again made to him to remain at the hotel as "bar-keeper."

"Business in almost every branch is favorable," was said, persuasively.

Still, Quince hesitated. Turn it as he would, he could not reconcile himself to the idea of living in a community where drinking was looked upon as respectable, and where ladies, even, gave wine-parties.

CHAPTER XIII.

QUINCE MEETS MR. SEAGO.

Quince walked forth with a firm step; but when the sun became high and his limbs grew weary his courage failed. Still, he kept on, asking for work whenever he passed a house or a farmer in the field. "Too early for extra hands, lad, and you don't look like a regular," was said by one; while another was sure there was something wrong when a boy like that was asking for work: "Must have run away from home, or something." At the last place a woman called him a "tramp" and shut the door in his face. Yet what was he but a tramp?

Moreover, his money was nearly gone, and only one offer had been made him. Possibly he had done wrong to refuse, and, dropping his bundle, he took a seat by the roadside

and questioned the propriety of going back; he could not; he had promised never to look at liquor, much less to handle it. How, then, was he to sell it? And to such men as Hardon, perhaps? No, no! It had not been for that vile stuff, he would now have had a home like other boys, with opportunities for study and the hope of making a man to be regarded and looked upon as others. And now! His head sunk lower; the courageous boy was actually weeping. Now what was there to hope for? "The iniquity of the fathers—" He could not go on. Darkness swept over him; the glad green earth could no longer be seen; the heavens were blotted out. Was it sleep, or had he fainted? He never knew. There was a faint tremor through his limbs and a trembling of the eyelids, and the light was once more around him; but he had fallen from the stump upon which he had been seated, and the sun was sinking toward the west.

With difficulty the lad straightened his limbs and once more grasped his bundle. He felt weak, and, glancing at the sun, he saw that he had lost valuable time. Urging himself, he reeled along the road like one who had drunk more than he could bear. Once a woman taunted him with this, and then stood in the door to see him go down the road.

At length the sun was hidden behind the tall spur of a mountain which he was passing, and still there was no promise in the outlook. Abrupt hills shot up everywhere; the farms were poor and barren, and the farmhouses were not close enough together to be neighbors. To the young traveller it seemed a solitude. A bird flitted along occasionally, but gave forth no song. A woman who had refused him shelter called out to him from the door that Chelmsford had built, a few miles beyond. Surely he had come a few miles! But there were no signs of a village.

Lifting his cap and pushing back his matted curls, the touch of the south wind comforted him. He had come round to a point from which he could see the sun again; a portion of its disk sent a shower of golden rays across the brown road and spread a glittering mat over the green bank. Blue violets nestled in the fence-corners; they reminded him of Scarborough. Gathering a handful, he bound them with a bit of blue ribbon which Esther had given him for a book-mark.

While thus engaged a sweet, fresh voice reached his ear, and presently a young girl her white apron filled with flowers, emerged from the green thicket, and was instantly followed by a gentleman of commanding appearance and genial manner.

"We have been gathering wild-flowers. And you have blue violets," the child said to Quince, without seeming to notice that he was a stranger.

"I just plucked them from the roadside. Will you please add them to your collection?" at the same time offering his bouquet to the child.

"You are very kind," interrupted the gentleman. "Gertrude will be sorry to take all that you have gathered."

"It will afford me pleasure; I have no one else to give them to," returned the lad as he picked up the book from which he had taken the blue ribbon.

Meantime Gertrude seated herself on the bank and began to arrange her flowers.

"Will you permit me to see your book?" the gentleman asked.

Quince blushed to the roots of his hair as he complied with the request.

"Latin!" exclaimed the gentleman.

"I was tired, and the reading of a few lines rested me; besides, I wanted the ribbon," answered Quince.

"How long have you studied Latin?"

"I had a teacher last winter; I have studied irregularly, just as I could."

"You are on your way to the academy, I presume?" continued the gentleman.

"No sir, I have been three days hunting work. Mr. Selma I was offered a position in the hotel, but I did not feel that I could accept it," he answered.

The gentleman seemed determined to follow up his questioning; and when he found that the lad had declined the offer to deal out liquor, he took him by the hand:

"A boy that can bravely turn his back upon such an offer must not despair. He will find something better; I am sure of it."

"Your good opinion of me will change when I tell you I would have turned back

had not the violets nestle brought distress. I do anything I right."

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