

the only one who has the courage to face Aunt Maria.'

'Yes, and think of his starting for town as if his heart were as light as a feather, when Bert Harris told me that he was to lead the prayer-meeting to-night, because the minister is sick. Think of his—his—well, I'll call it pluck, for want of just the right word.'

'It is something we know nothing of, anyhow,' was the emphatic rejoinder. 'I think it required more pluck, as you call it, for the boy to ask a blessing before us, after we had made such sport of him, than to lead a meeting surrounded by those who are in sympathy with him.'

'So do I. I am ashamed every time I think how we dubbed him "parson" and that kind of teasing; but we had our match. Our ridicule seemed to make him the more determined to do what he considered his duty.'

'But Aunt Maria's coming will put an end to that sort of thing. I am confident, for, if we can judge by the tone of her letters, she is not of Joe's way of thinking. So he'll not dare to ask a blessing before her.'

'Perhaps you are right,' said Frank, 'but if Joe is actuated by the motives I think he is, the coming of the Queen herself would not shame him into keeping silence.'

The three sons, who were recently brought to my notice and whom I now introduce to you, are the only children of a widowed mother, who bears little resemblance to the bonnie bride the young Englishman had taken to himself soon after landing on American soil; for the young couple had soon made their home in what was then regarded as the West, where hard work and sorrow had prematurely aged the wife and mother.

Mr. Owen lived long enough to clear his Michigan farm and see it under a good state of cultivation. Then he passed beyond the river, leaving the wife, to whom the world was never the same again, and her three sons to struggle on and on, as must other wives and children when the head is taken—because they must.

As the years crept on, and the sons grew to manhood they were in the main, a comfort to their mother; still she was at times, very despondent, because she sorely missed the companion of her youth; then, too, she had lost sight of the Comforter, the only balm for a sorrowing heart, consequently she was doubly bereft.

A year previous to our finding the mother and sons a rift had been made in the cloud, which for long years had enveloped the home, for Joe, who had been persuaded by a neighboring farmer's son to attend a series of meetings, had given his heart to Christ and consecrated every power to his service.

The day after this noble stand had been taken Joe said to his mother, 'I am determined to be a Christian, come what may. Won't you go with me to the meeting to-night and take the same stand, mother, dear? It would be easier for you, because I heard you tell the minister, when he called once, that you made a start when you lived East.'

The mother was quick to see the change in her 'baby'; still she was unprepared to hear him speak with such firmness, for of him his brothers had often said: 'Joe'll follow where we lead, every time. He hasn't courage enough to go it independently.'

This earnest plea, however, was met by a shake of the mother's head, and the words: 'I shall not oppose you, my son; but you are mistaken in thinking that because I once made a profession of religion that it would be easier to live religion, for I believe that it is harder for a so-called back-slider to be renewed than for one like you, dear boy, to take the noble stand that you have.'

The mother, true to her word, did not oppose Joe in whatever his heart prompted him to do, but the older sons, to whom she had never broached the subject, which was more important than all beside, did not regard her as any hindrance to whatever slighting comment they were disposed to make regarding what was most sacred to the sensitive soul of one who suffered in silence.

Meanwhile, in spite of their jokes, the brothers were never half so proud before the one at whom they were aimed, and, at heart, the mother shared this feeling, when such remarks as the following reached her ears: 'Joe is as firm as a rock when his mind is made up. I honor his grit. If there were more like him there would be less of our sort.'

This condition of things existed as the first year of this new life had been lived. As is evident the brothers, who after a little ceased to speak lightly of what they realized had wrought the change in the one they truly loved, had from the first studied the daily walk of their younger brother and were often led to wonder at the sudden development of powers they had not suspected.

The mother, too, looked on with feelings of both gladness and sadness. The new light which had filled the heart of her youngest was reflected in his happy face, and often reminded her of the days when, with a glad heart, she sang:

'Oh, how happy are they, who the Saviour obey.

And have laid up their treasure above;
Tongue can never express the sweet comfort
and peace

Of a soul in its earliest love.'

And this had awakened a longing to return to her Father's house. For she well knew that 'comfort and peace' were not obtainable elsewhere. But all this she had kept buried in her heart, but she was being led day by day nearer the cross of Christ by the example of the one she had always regarded as her timid child.

'Well, we must draw cuts to decide who will meet her highness,' said Jerome, as a belated letter was read at the noon meal, which conveyed the intelligence that the afternoon train would leave the long expected aunt at the station, some miles distant.

'I think it is your place, Jerome, seeing you are not only the oldest son, but the namesake, as well, of the brother who is not—here—to—meet—her.'

She ended so brokenly that the sons who always were made cowardly at the sight of tears, suddenly left the room, motioning Joe, who looked ready to cry in sympathy, to follow.

A little later the latter appeared, dressed in his best, which called forth the exclamation: 'You mustn't go, too, Joe! You will crowd your aunt, if you do.'

'Why, mother, there is but one going to meet her, and I am that one,' was the laughing rejoinder, 'Jerome and Frank plead urgent business, and so the honor is left to me.'

The mother readily understood, and, with a tender light in her tear-dimmed eyes, said: 'My dear, brave boy!'

As Joe drove out of the yard he turned to his brothers and said cheerily: 'Well, I'm in for it, but I am afraid I will not do the family credit.'

As Joe's merry whistle was wafted to the ears of the brothers who closed the gate after him, and then leaned against it as if forgetful of the 'urgent business,' Jerome's feelings had vent in: 'I always did despise a coward! but I've furnished myself the biggest job I ever had in that line. I knew it was my place to go, as mother said, and I

had no intention of shirking the duty. I asked Joe to go more to try his metal than anything else, but when he consented so cheerfully, I was only too ready to shirk what has been such a dread to me.'

'I haven't much respect for myself, either,' remarked the brother two years younger. Aunt writes that my picture bears so strong a likeness to my father, when of my age, that to have seen me first might have made her feel less strange, at the start. But, say, Jerome, I've been thinking that if having what Joe has makes men of cowards, it is something we need, too.' Saying which he suddenly thought of the mother he had left weeping and with unwonted tenderness went to the house to see if she stood in need of the 'chirking up,' which usually came from another source.

When the train came to a standstill, Joe looked in vain for the richly dressed woman he expected to see. Only two women alighted. One was the wife of a neighboring farmer, while the other was quite as plainly dressed, but when she raised her veil the waiting one knew that the little woman in simple attire was the wealthy aunt of whom he had so long stood in awe, and, with an uplifted prayer for strength to do his whole duty by his father's sister, he lifted his hat, saying: 'If I am not mistaken, this is my Aunt Maria. I am Joe, your youngest nephew.'

A little later aunt and nephew were riding over the rough road talking 'just like two women,' as Joe told his mother, and before they reached the farm-house the shrewd business woman had not only formed a high opinion of the one to whom she had given little thought, but suspected why the older brothers had neither of them taken the pains to meet her, after she had crossed the great ocean for the express purpose of seeing the family of her only brother.

The first moments in the society of the aunt had banished Joe's fear of her, and yet he felt somewhat hurt when, during the ride, he dropped hints of the subject uppermost in his mind to note that he received no encouragement to continue along that line. For in spite of the fact that her letters had given no intimation of it, he had fondly hoped that at heart his aunt was a Christian.

When they reached the farm-house and tearful greetings had been exchanged between those who were sisters because of the one who was not, Jerome and Frank came forward and cordially endeavored to make amends for their cowardice. Meanwhile Joe followed his mother into the kitchen to say: 'Now, don't be nervous, mother. She is ever so nice. Not at all the kind of person we imagined her to be.'

The little mother was nervous, however, extremely so; but more so on her son's account than on her own and, taking him by the arm when she had finished preparing the supper, she said: 'My son, I wouldn't ask a blessing while your aunt is here, if I were you. It would look so queer for you, the youngest member of the family, to take the lead in such matters; besides, I don't think she is in sympathy with that sort of thing.'

The weak, timid mother could not put into the words the fact that her son's course was a constant rebuke to her, but when her boy made no answer, she added: 'It might look, too, as if you considered yourself better than the rest of us, and so I advise you to omit the blessing until we are alone again.'

The blessing had been uppermost in Joe's thoughts, and so his mother's views of the still unsettled query, 'Can I?' seemed to