

QUINCE, AND HOW THE LORD LED HIM.

(By Miss L. Bates.)

CHAPTER I.
QUINCE'S QUESTION.

Quince opened the door of the kitchen far enough to throw in a bundle of small parcels, evidently groceries, around which a leather strap was drawn, and fastened with a buckle. Then he closed it noiselessly behind him, and, taking a wooden pail from a shelf outside, went down the path in the direction of an open shed, from which had come at intervals for the last half hour a faint, gentle lowing.

"Just like that boy!" exclaimed a sharp-visaged woman, coming from some inner room. "Ten to one the papers are broken and the contents half wasted."

"Why, Rachel, that is hardly fair. Quince always takes so much pains to please you," ventured an elderly woman, in a voice that denoted habitual good-nature.

"Of course, mother, you will take his part," was the petulant rejoinder.

Meanwhile, Rachel Evans had unfastened the buckle, thereby letting all the brown-paper parcels roll over the strip of bright rag carpet that crossed the floor to the hearth.

"He heard Betty, no doubt, and most likely his boots were wet or muddy," suggested the other.

"Most likely he had some excuse," Rachel snapped out as she gathered up the parcels in her apron and hurried away to the pantry.

The elder woman stirred the fire on the hearth, while a pink glow danced over the room. It was not cold outside, but the nights were beginning to be chilly; besides, a fire was cheerful, Rachel said. Then she drew her chair nearer, and smoothed the strip of carpet in the willingness to make herself believe that she had something to do.

Then a step was heard on the hard path, and Quince swung a pail of foamy milk to the broad white shelf in the dairy. When this was done, he quietly lathed his face and hands, and, coming into the kitchen, stood with his head resting against the mantel and the toes of his boots reaching out to the fire.

"You haven't been in the water have you, Quince?" asked Grandmamma Evans. "No, but I came home through the grass—it's nearer—and the dew is heavy." At the same time he drew two letters from his pocket and laid them on the mantel. "Rachel said she was expecting some."

There was a weary look in the lad's face, and his voice was suggestive of some hidden sob.

The sharp-faced woman re-entered the room. "What kept you so long?" she asked, drawing a chair to the table and opening the letters with a perceptible tremor.

"They kept me waiting at the grocery; and at the post-office I had to wait for the mail to be distributed."

"Well, there's your bread and milk any time you want it; and if your feet are wet, you'd better take off your boots and dry 'em. I don't want anybody 'round with a cold, and, as like as not, quince, if I can help it."

Rachel Evans, in spite of her sharp ways, was a kind-hearted woman. She had known Quince's mother, and she really liked Quince; but habit had given her a sharp way of speaking. A pattern of neatness and given to hospitality, her door was always open to the suffering; and when Quince's father died, a victim to strong drink, and his gentle mother soon followed her husband to the grave, she had taken the boy to live with her, and had with well-intentioned kindness cared for him. His clothes were clean and whole, and his thin white face was scanned closely and a practical diagnosis made out every day. Hence the allusion to the cold.

Without remark grandmamma went into her own room and brought out a pair of faded red slippers and set them down by Quince's chair. The latter drew off his boots and carefully placed them on the bricks beyond the carpet. Then he went into the pantry for his bowl of bread and milk, and was eating it while Rachel ran over the contents of her letters and then read them aloud to her mother.

"Just like Josiah!" He says the note will be due in six weeks, lacking a day, and he considers it will be paid without further

trouble. I thought as much," letting her hand close over the letter and looking her mother in the face. "Simms is a man inclined to take advantage of a woman, but with a man like Josiah Talbot it's a different thing—an entirely different thing. There's law for Josiah, and Simms knows it."

"I'm glad it can be settled without difficulty. There's your father, Rachel, never would go to law. 'Better to lose a debt,' he said, 'than once get tangled up with lawyers,'" was the rejoinder in the same quiet tone.

Rachel did not say it, but her features showed that she was thinking that if her father had been a little more careful to gather in his dues, the struggle for her to live would have been less severe.

In the pause grandmamma put on her spectacles and reached out her hand for her knitting.

"Who's the other from?" she asked as she slipped a needle into the sheath that was fastened to her dress.

"It's from Hetty—little Hetty. Her mother don't send letters to anybody since Hetty's big enough to write."

"All well?" continued grandmamma.

"All well; yes," answered Rachel as she turned to the open letter and read it aloud.

"Didn't say anything about coming?" said grandmamma, still knitting. "I'd like to see Hetty, and I've been looking a little for her to come before winter," lapsing into silence, while the click of her needles went on.

Leaving the two women to talk over their letters, Quince said "Good-night" and slipped away to his own room under the eaves.

"Leave the door open, so you can see; I will shut it," said grandmamma as the lad went up the narrow, carpetless stairs.

It was Quince's usual habit to get out his books at night—winter was coming, and he hoped to be able to do the chores and go to school—but so much interested was Rachel with her letters that she did not question him.

Quince was grateful for this, for as soon as he reached his room his assumed composure gave way. All the evening the words had rankled in his heart: "Upon the children unto the third and fourth generation." Waiting in the grocery it had come plainly to his ears. He knew the people there were talking about his father, his excesses, and his terrible death. Perhaps they did not know he was near enough to hear, but he was near, and there was no other place for him; and how was he to help hearing?

"Never was a smarter man than Peter Brockton, if he'd let liquor alone. But he couldn't; it was as natural for him to drink as for a fish to swim," laughed one.

"Might have been a rich man," added another. "Instead of that, he ran through everything—lost it. It just killed his wife and made a beggar of his boy." Wonder if Rachel Evans is to adopt him? Heard she was to."

"A poor stock to tie to;" and there followed a laugh almost that froze the heart of the lad. "A chip of the old block. As soon as he gets old enough he'll go like all of 'em."

"If I remember right, Quince is more like his mother than he is like his father. She was a thoroughly good woman; the boy may escape."

Then followed the words that had rung in the lad's ear with bitter meaning: "Upon the children unto the third and fourth generation."

The grocery-clerk was tying up the last of his parcels. Quince gathered them into his leather strap, and fastened the buckle securely; then he swung the bundle to his shoulder and turned quickly from the door. His first thought was of the graveyard; his mother was there. When he was heart-broken, it was the place for him to go to. Lying at his length with his face pressed to the green earth, he found comfort. Did she know that he was trying, and that he remembered his promise? Yes, she did know it; he never for a moment doubted that. God knew, for God knew everything; and his mother was with God.

The great round moon was sailing slowly through the heavens; the silver radiance of the stars made a bright path across the well-scrubbed floor. Quince leaned over the casement and gazed up at the distant world—homes of the angels, who used to live on earth—and, gazing at the brightest, he questioned if it was in reality one of the many

mansions. The dark eyes were full of tears and the pale cheeks were wet. He covered his face with his hands and cried out for the mother whose presence had always been a comfort to him. How could he live without her! Gradually his thoughts grew clearer. He knew that his mother would never come back to him, but he would go to her. He must fulfil the promise he made to her never to touch a drop of liquor. He knew that it was true that strong drink had killed his father—knew that he would have been a rich man but for it. A fine estate had gone down his throat, together with a grand old house. His mother had told him this, and together they had stood shivering in the street looking at it. He remembered how his mother threw her arms around his neck and wept and prayed that the love of strong drink might never be his.

"Promise me, my boy, never to touch it." He had promised her, and he would keep that promise. But could he, if—

"Quince, are you at the window? What in the world are you doing? You will catch your death-cold."

It was Rachel with a candle in her hand. He had forgotten that his door was open.

CHAPTER II.

HUGH MERCER AND QUINCE.

The next morning there was no allusion to the lateness of Quince's retiring the night previous. He went through with his duties as usual, and then started out to join a neighboring lad in cutting and drawing wood. Rachel Evans was considered a good manager; she always had plenty of wood on hand, cut and split and corded up in the shed. True, it was early in the season; but if Quince went to school—and she intended to have him go—she must begin to get work under way, so that he would not be hindered in his studies.

"I don't think the boy is well this morning; he is paler than usual and there's a troubled look in his eyes. What do you suppose it is, Rachel?" asked grandmamma as she stood in the door and looked after Quince.

"Up too late last night, mother. Besides, he's growing fast; I don't suppose he can be very strong," was the reply.

"I hope he won't have to load and unload; it's too heavy work for him at any time, and to-day especially," continued grandmamma.

"He didn't say he felt sick; if he had complained, I wouldn't have let him go," Rachel jerked out.

"Well, well, we can't help it now;" and her mother shut the house door and busied herself with her stocking-basket. Quince must have some nice warm socks, and they must be long. This would be her work; she could not bear to see the pale, pinched face without doing all she could to make it cheerful.

Hugh Mercer, the neighbor with whom Quince was to work, was several years the older of the two—a stout, muscular youth with some knowledge of life and with a laudable ambition to profit by his experience. Like Quince, he was thinking of going to school during the coming winter, and this anticipation rendered easier the work that he now had to do.

Hugh had not always lived in Scarborough, and during the day he had many questions to ask concerning the people he had met, and had in return—unconsciously, no doubt—alluded to many things that only deepened the perplexity in which Quince found himself.

"Beats all how some folks do," Hugh said as he seated himself on a log and began to unpack his lunch-basket. "Some folks never forget if any of your relations get into trouble; and they'll be sure to fling it up to you. No matter what it is and how it came about, it follows of course that you are to do it, and your children are to do it, and so end to it. Now, with me, I would think that any wrong done by one's father would be enough to keep his children from doing the same thing. wouldn't you?" handing the basket to Quince.

The latter felt a choking sensation in his throat; he would gladly have run away for a good cry. Of course, Hugh had heard all about his father, and knew of the impression in everybody's mind that he must of necessity follow in the same path.

"Take some more," persisted Hugh, as the basket was returned without being essentially lightened. Don't like it? If you don't eat, you can't work," laughing.

"I'm not hungry, for some reason," an-

swered Quince. "Perhaps I will be before night; then I'll go to the basket."

"I used to have days and days when I couldn't eat before I came to Scarborough," Hugh was picking up the same thread. Quince trembled still more. "My father got into trouble in some way—I never quite knew how. It wasn't his fault, it was said; but the guilty parties got away, and there was no one else to fasten it upon; and they made it out a crime, and he had to go to prison. It killed him, and it killed mother and broke us all up. Now, don't you suppose I'd do what he did just to oblige his friends? He never thought of doing anything wrong, but it was made to appear wrong, and his name was there. Knowing all that we suffered, you'd better believe I'd be cautious; none of my friends would get me to do the same. I've just made up my mind to that. I'll sign a paper for nobody. But no; they flung it at me right and left. I could not stand it—no, indeed!" and the next moment he was working away at the log as if in defiance of the feeling that was urging him on.

Quince longed to know precisely what had taken place, but he would not ask. At length, and seemingly worn out with the intensity of his effort, Hugh said:

"It was the best thing, and I've not been sorry for't; I just give up and come away. They don't know me here, and I don't intend that they ever shall know anything bad of me. My father wasn't a bad man; he was unfortunate. It is no sign I shall be," with a little unconscious triumph in his voice.

Quince did not feel that he could bear any more in this vein. Unasked, Hugh had made him a confidant, and he was sorry for it, inasmuch as it called up his own trouble and strengthened the meshes of a certain fatalism that already threatened him. Of one thing he was sure, however: Hugh did not look contemptuously upon him because his father had been a hard drinker. Possibly he did not know it; and if he did not, then it was not such a matter of discussion in the village, after all, and he was unduly troubled.

Night came, and with it the young woodmen sought their respective homes.

"I hope we can go to school together this winter," Hugh said. Then, with a warmth that quite startled Quince, "I know I'll like you, and we'll get on together. Of course, I'm older and bigger, but it stands to reason you know ever so much more in books than I do. You see, I've never had a chance."

"If I go this winter, I'm to begin Latin," said Quince; but his voice did not indicate certainty.

"I'm to try for it. I've never been to school regular, but I mean to learn," was said, resolutely.

At the crossing Hugh tossed off a quick "Good-night, Quince!" and the latter, sending it back, scampered down the road in the direction of his home with Rachel Evans. Once he turned, as if to take counsel with himself. The graveyard was in sight; he longed to go there for just one look. But no; it was sundown. Betty would be waiting, and her gentle lowing would lead Rachel to question. He would finish all that he had to do, and then return. With this consideration he grew calm, and even cheerful.

Grandmamma Evans was standing near the open shed as Quince came down the path with his milk-pail on his arm.

"Betty has been calling for you," she said, pleasantly.

"I knew she would be waiting," was the reply.

"Have you had a good day?" asked grandmamma, in the same even tone.

"Hugh knows more about woodcutting than I do. I don't think I cut as much as he did," showering the milk into his pail with renewed energy.

"I should hope not. Hugh is older and stronger than you are, Quince. Fisher likes him ever so much, I hear, and he's right smart in his books too," continued grandmamma.

There was no reply. Betty looked her thanks with her great brown eyes, and once more the brimming pail of milk was swung to the broad shelf in the dairy.

Rachel had been to the village, and was now coming up the garden-path.

"You needn't go the office," she said to Quince. "I stopped there; nothing but a paper."

The latter was almost sorry. Not that he