

"Nobody would think of doing it. Now, do be sensible."

"Well, you speak of fasting. The Italian that ate nothing for sixty days must have been a very good man at the end of that time."

"He did it as an experiment; not from religious motives."

"Then if he had done it during a whole Lenten season in the same spirit in which you give up tea, it would have been something most praiseworthy? Your little fasting would be almost without merit in comparison?"

"Oh, I don't believe in extremes."

"But if fasting is self-denial, and self-denial is merit, then to fast much must be a greater merit than to fast a little. Come, now, isn't that so? Wouldn't it be better still to eat only what is necessary to keep body and soul together, and do without fire, and see no friends, and pay no calls, and enjoy no society for forty days? These you like, and to do without them would be self-denial in an extreme degree."

"I don't know anything about it," said Mrs. Richards, getting excited. "I only know it is right for church people to fast during Lent. I can't argue with a man."

"Well, now, you just said, a moment ago, that fasting must be from religious motives. Then you admit that the motive is an important thing?"

"Oh, of course."

"That's what I was coming to. I hold that self-denial is good only when the motives are good. To eat less, or drink less, has no religious significance unless it be for a religious purpose. What I want to know is what you fast for? You don't think God loves us better simply because we are hungry or in want?"

"Didn't Christ fast?" broke in Mrs. Richards, with an air of triumph. She had just thought of that.

"Ah, yes! and why? Was it not because He wanted unbroken communion with God, and didn't wish to be distracted even by eating and drinking or anything else? All His energies He wanted to give to higher things. If fasting strengthens and deepens one's communion with God, I say, by all means fast." "Do you so use fasting, as a means to an end, and make that end a more unbroken communion with God?"

"No, I can't say I do. I fast simply because I think it's right."

"Well, in that case, it would be wrong for you not to fast; but still the fact remains that it isn't wrong in itself.

There is nothing obligatory in fasting. It's at most a help to godliness."

Here Mrs. Allen, who had been following the conversation closely, wishing to prevent Mr. Willis from getting too deep for them, said:

"It seems to me that there is a nobler purpose in Lent, no matter whether it's good or not to fast and to keep out of society. Lent has always been the season that reminded me of sin, and of the necessity of drawing closer to Jesus to conquer it. There are so many serious things that fill my mind then. I may be wrong, but the abstinence that seems to me most necessary is abstinence from sin. I have only to look within, and I see meanness everywhere, evil thoughts, bad temper, uncharitableness, and selfishness. It's so easy to degenerate, and live a worldly life. What I try to do in Lent is to abstain from my most besetting sins and fast from self-indulgence of every kind, whether in food, or clothing, or amusement, or anything else. Self-indulgence is by no means only in food. Almost all sin seems to me a form of self-indulgence, and I try during Lent to be more serious, and live more with Christ and conquer sin; though it seems to me we ought to do it all the year round."

"Good!" said Mrs. Willis. "Mrs. Allen has hit the nail on the head. I agree with her thoroughly. That's what the collect for Ash Wednesday teaches: 'Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ.' And to give one's self wholly to such serious thoughts it's necessary to withdraw from the world of society; otherwise the best efforts would often be disturbed and thwarted."

Mrs. Richards was not a woman of very serious thoughts or any deep piety. Her religious emotions were not strong. She went regularly to church, and was a communicant, but with that she was apt to consider her religious duties at an end. She had never thought much about Lent at all. What she did then was a matter of custom that she had learnt to follow, but didn't fully understand. Ordinarily she was very self-satisfied, but somehow the quiet words of Mrs. Allen had troubled and disconcerted her. Whether it was the tone in which they were delivered or something else, they made an impression. Very shortly after she left for home, and Mr. Lewis, who escorted her,

noticed that she was unusually quiet.

For some days the conversation of that night lingered in her mind, and made her seem just a little absent-minded at times. But soon household matters and social duties occupied her with totally different thoughts, and the discussion as to Lent was forgotten. But ideas once lodged in the mind often cannot be altogether forgotten.

Unnoticed, they exercise their quiet influence. So it was in this case. She did not know it, but below the region of consciousness the heaven was at work. It was as a seed lodged in unfavorable soil striving to go through the normal processes of growth, but needing more favorable conditions to bring it above the surface of the ground.

And these more favorable conditions appeared in due time. At the end of February, after several months of gaiety, the solemn Lenten season came. Ash Wednesday found Mrs. Richards in church as was her custom. Heretofore, the service for that day had seemed to her to differ very little from any other service. She took it as a matter of course, without its making much impression. But this year everything appeared changed. She had never, she thought, been at so solemn a service. As they went through those Psalms for the day, every confession, every complaint, every petition was as if specially for her. Then came the collect—the collect she recalled so well as being read to her that night at Mrs. Allen's. The words *new and contrite hearts* rang out as a stinging rebuke to her for her light thoughts of Lent in the past. Finally, when the communion service was completed, there were thoughts in Mrs. Richards's mind that had never been there before, but which it is always a blessing to entertain. Little did the congregation who knew the bright and fashionable Mrs. Richards know what was going on in her heart.

Then the usual Ash Wednesday sermon followed. One had always been like another to her. She had taken them as appropriate to the occasion, but never had heard in them any special message to herself. But this year, for some reason, she followed the sermon as if it were for her alone. Among other things the rector spoke of self-denial, and pointed out that true self-denial did not consist in afflicting and torturing oneself for its own sake, but in sacrifice for the good of another, or in furtherance of some good. He instanced a mother whose devotion to her children was so pure, and her eagerness for their wel-