

WHAT FOLLOWED.

"Fifteen minutes of nine, Harry. You have no time to lose," called his mother, as Harry Welsh, after opening the door, stood upon the front steps, enjoying the beauty of the May morning.

"All right! It only takes me ten minutes to walk to the office." He began to move a little more briskly, and had his hand upon the gate when Ruth Burnett's voice arrested him.

"Would you like a rose-bud for your button-hole?"

The garden-lots of Mrs. Welsh and Dr. Burnett were separated by a low pale fence, and Harry, looking across, saw pretty Ruth, with garden gloves and scissors, clipping a bouquet for her parlor vases. She held up a saffron bud, and Harry needed no second invitation to step to the fence and receive it.

Harry was eighteen and Ruth seventeen. They had graduated together last June from the Clifton Academy. The old school-boy and school-girl intimacy, had within the last few months, begun to assume a slightly coquettish character, more self-conscious than the old relation, though still scarcely dignified enough to be on quite a "grown-up" footing. They had plenty to say to each other, though the chatter was not particularly wise.

"I suppose a yellow rose-bud is hardly worth your acceptance. Heliotrope, I have been informed, is your favorite flower," said Ruth, as she pinned her offering to his coat.

"Who gave you that valuable information?"

"The birds of the air whispered it, perhaps; or perhaps somebody sharper than a bird overheard the conversation in Mrs. Gray's bow window last night, when a certain gentleman got possession of a certain lady's fan, and refused to deliver it until she had ransomed it by the sacrifice of part of her bouquet."

"Now, who told you that, I should like to know! You weren't at the social."

"Somebody else was, however, though you, it seems, had eyes but for one."

"Who told you?"

"Guess!"

Thus the conversation continued, until the sound of the town clock striking nine brought the interview to an abrupt close.

"Nine o'clock, and I shall be late again! That is your fault, you naughty girl!" and with this unceremonious leave-taking Harry started for the gate, striding off down town as fast as his long legs would carry him.

He was seriously annoyed, and he had good cause to be. When he had graduated last year, his future career had been a matter of anxious concern both to his mother and to himself, and they accepted with thanks the offer made to Harry by Col. Holcomb of a clerk's seat in his office. The salary offered, though small, was quite sufficient to lighten his mother's cares, while the opportunity of studying under the colonel's oversight was an advantage that outweighed the money compensation he received.

The colonel himself felt that he had done Harry a favor in giving him the place. He would have preferred an older and more experienced clerk, but he had taken Harry simply because he felt it a duty to help the widow and her boy.

The colonel was highly respected by his fellow-townsmen. He was liberal, high-minded and energetic, and used his large income wisely and generously. With all his virtues, however, he had some marked peculiarities. One of these was a tendency to look upon small failings with a less charitable eye than upon greater sins.

Punctuality was his hobby, and Harry had received many admonitions from him upon the necessity of acquiring that virtue, so that he fully understood the colonel's views and requirements upon it.

Nine o'clock was the hour the young man was expected to take his seat in the office, and during the first few months of his employment he had not failed to be at his work at that time. Twice during the previous week, however, he had been late. The second time the colonel had expressed great displeasure, and Harry felt very loth to encounter such a rebuke again.

He drew a long breath of relief when, upon entering the office this morning, he found his employer was not there. The colonel, who kept early hours, was generally at his desk by seven o'clock, but he

frequently left the office before Harry's arrival.

"If he went out before nine o'clock, he will probably never know of this last piece of negligence of mine," thought Harry, as he took his chair. With thankfulness for his narrow escape, however, came also a twinge of compunction. "I declare I won't let such a thing as this happen again! The old gentleman isn't far wrong when he says such carelessness is inexorable."

Then he betook himself to his daily tasks with more than usual diligence to atone, so far as he might, for his delinquency. Half an hour later the colonel entered. His manner grave, but he exchanged greetings with Harry in his usual friendly way. Looking around with a vexed and disappointed air, he asked,—

"Has there been a man here to see me?"

"No, sir."

The colonel took his seat at his desk without further remarks, and Harry thought, "I am safe this time," and continued his work with a lighter heart.

The bells were ringing at noon before the colonel spoke again. It was his custom to remain in the office until Harry had dined and returned, and to-day, as Harry was making preparation for departure, he looked up from his work and asked, rather abruptly,—

"At what hour did you leave home this morning, Welsh?"

"At a quarter of nine, sir," replied Harry, remembering his mother's words as he left the house.

"It takes you about ten minutes to walk down here?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, with heightened color.

"I was called out of the office unexpectedly a little before nine this morning," continued the colonel. "Poor old Mr. Roberts had a paralytic stroke, and his wife sent for me to help to get him from the shop to his bed. I did not like to leave, as I had told Dan Shaw to meet me here at nine o'clock. I need not have troubled myself, however, for, as usual, the rascal forgot the appointment, as he forgets everything else he ought to attend to. I could hardly have missed him, I think. It was about a quarter of nine when I was called out but you, I presume, were here when the hour struck?"

The colonel paused inquiringly. Harry was too much dismayed to pause for thought. His present predicament was far worse than the earlier one. It would have been had enough to plead guilty to a third case of unpunctuality within a week; but now, the prevaricating answers he had given would justly have subjected him to a far severer reprimand. The colonel waited an answer. There was no time for consideration, and Harry answered,—

"Yes, sir."

Nothing more was said, and the next moment the lad was in the street, his cheeks burning, his eyes filled with remorseful tears, feeling more heartily ashamed of himself than ever he had felt in all his honest young life before.

He reviewed the situation very thoroughly on his homeward walk. Conscience cried loudly, "Confess your sin at once, and ask forgiveness." Pride promptly rejoined, "What good would that do! The lie has been told. Confession now would bring shame, and do no good."

Not to confess seemed less painful than confession would be, so he concluded to remain silent. "I'll never be guilty of such a falsehood again," was his energetic conclusion. "But nobody shall know of this if I can help it." Then he tried to cast the affair out of his mind.

Meanwhile, at the office, Col. Holcomb pursued his work for some time after his clerk's departure. He was aroused by the opening of the outer door, and raising his eyes, saw before him a tall, haggard man with bloodshot eyes, unshaven chin and general seediness of aspect. He was perfectly sober, however, and albeit as he looked, poor wretch, he walked towards the colonel's desk with a composure and self-respect he had seldom felt of late years.

"Found you this time, have I, colonel?" said he, in a tone which, though familiar, was perfectly respectful. "Taint a likely story to tell, and there ain't many folks would believe if I did tell it, that you and me made an appointment, and you broke it."

The stern glance the colonel had turned towards the stranger when he first entered,

changed now to a look of undisguised contempt.

"It is scarcely worth while to incur the sin of falsehood to cover your lack of punctuality, Shaw. You wish me to believe, I suppose, that you came to the office this morning, and did not find me?" "That's just what I did," rejoined the man, his red face growing visibly redder. "I was here before nine, and dangled my legs on yon high stool for a good quarter-hour. Then, as I had a little job of work to attend to, I concluded I'd better go, and give your honor another call when you had more time to talk to me."

The colonel bent his clear gray eyes sharply upon his visitor. "You were here this morning at nine o'clock, you say?"

"That's just what I was; that is, if your clock yonder don't lie, for it struck while I was here waiting."

"If you could not wait why did you not leave a message for me with my clerk?"

"There was no clerk to leave it with. There wasn't a soul in the office the whole time I was here."

"That will do, Shaw," said the colonel, sternly. "I will not listen to any more falsehoods. I know positively that the office has not been left unoccupied for a longer time than ten minutes since seven this morning. Your excuses are mere fabrications, and the little faith I was beginning to place in your promises of reform I have lost. I had a good place for you, but after the specimen of your untruthfulness you have given to-day, you cannot have a recommendation of help from me. You may go, sir; I have no further use for you."

The poor wretch endeavored to expostulate and explain; but the colonel would not listen, and he left the office in despair.

Harry Welsh returned to his work at the usual time. Col. Holcomb made no allusion to the interview he had just had, and after a few days Harry concluded that his misdemeanor was a thing of the past.

Something like a week later, Mr. Whitlow, the proprietor of a neighboring store, came into the office where the colonel and his clerk were working together.

"Have you heard of the tragedy in 'Irish-town'?" Nancy Lawson was just in the store and gave the particulars.

"No, I have not heard," said the colonel.

"Dan Shaw has committed suicide, she tells me."

"Poor wretch!" said the colonel, in tones of genuine compassion. "I hope his lot in another world may be better than it has been in this."

"It couldn't well be worse," rejoined Mr. Whitlow. "He has been a hard drinker, as every one knows, but Nancy tells me that the temperance folks got hold of him a few weeks ago, and to so good a purpose that for a while it really seemed as though he were going to reform. He had been steady and eager to do whatever work he could obtain, until a little more than a week ago, when he suddenly broke down, and seemed to have lost all heart. He declared that the world was against him, and that no one would trust or believe him, no matter how hard he tried to do right. After that he took to drink again worse than ever. Last night, it seems, he mixed laudanum with his whiskey, and put an end to all his earthly troubles."

Col. Holcomb had thrown down his pen, and was now sitting back in his chair with a very troubled expression of countenance.

"Do you know, Whitlow, I am afraid I am somewhat to blame for this, yet, God knows, I meant well by poor Dan, and if I could have conscientiously served him, I would have done so. I had heard of his taking the blue ribbon. Some of the ladies of the Methodist Church spoke to me about him, asking me to help him to a job of work now and then."

"I said I would, and happening a day or two later to hear of an opening that I thought he might fill, I made an appointment with him to meet me here last—let me see—what day was it I spoke to you about him, Welsh?"

"A week ago last Wednesday, sir," replied Harry, remembering the day only too well.

"Yes; I told him to come to me here at nine o'clock sharp. I was called out unexpectedly just before that time, but Welsh was here at nine, and we neither of us saw or heard anything of him. In the afternoon of the same day he called, and coolly declared that he was here at nine o'clock, and found no one in."

"He said he waited fifteen minutes or so,

and as no one came in, he went off. I never heard a lie told with such unhesitating fluency. I think I should really have believed him, if I had not been assured by Harry here that he was in the office when the clock struck nine, the very moment that Shaw positively declared he was here himself. Of course so barefaced a falsehood irritated me, and I sent him about his business pretty roughly, I am afraid. I am sorry now for the manner in which I dismissed him, but for the act itself it seems to me I was hardly to blame."

"Most other men would have done the same," replied Mr. Whitlow, and soon after took his departure.

After a moment's sober meditation, Col. Holcomb took up his pen and was about to resume work, when an exclamation, half-sob, half-groan, drew his attention to his clerk. The lad was lying forward upon the table, his face hidden in his outstretched arms, so silent and motionless that the colonel got frightened, and advanced quickly to his side.

"What is the trouble?" he cried; "are you ill?"

Harry raised a white, haggard face. "I am not ill, Col. Holcomb," he said. "I wish I was; I wish I were dead. I shall never have a happy moment again as long as I live."

"If your body is not affected, your mind certainly is," said the colonel, now seriously alarmed. "Here! I will get you a glass of water."

"No," said Harry, "I do not need it; I can tell you in a moment what the trouble is;" he paused to gather resolution, then continued rapidly, "It was not poor Dan Shaw who lied to you the other day, Col. Holcomb—it was I. It was ten minutes past nine when I entered the office, and so far as I know, Shaw's story was true—every word of it."

The colonel fell back a step or two, his face growing dark with dismay and indignation. "Can it be possible?" he cried; "have I been so deceived in you? Do you know that, if the thing you accuse yourself of is true, you are responsible before God for?"

"Don't say it! Don't say it!" cried Harry, grasping his arm; and softened in spite of himself by the agony in the boy's voice,—the white misery of his face,—the colonel paused in his denunciations, adding soberly, a moment later,—

"I also am to blame. I should not have been so one-sided—so hasty in judgment."

A pause ensued, broken at last by Harry's quavering voice. "Do you think it is certainly true? Is there no hope that the story is false, or at least exaggerated?"

The colonel turned abruptly to the table where his hat and cane were lying. "We will soon find out. Get your hat and we will go together to see if anything can yet be done for the poor fellow."

Harry mutely obeyed. Together the two traversed the narrow streets that led to that portion of the town inhabited by the lowest class of its population. The house they sought was a miserable shanty around which a crowd was gathered. As the colonel approached, a woman whom he recognized as the old wash-woman, Nancy Lawson, saluted him, and he stopped to ask a few questions.

"I have heard that Dan Shaw is dead. Do you know whether the report is true?"

"An' what else could it be, an' him with laudanum enough inside him to poison a regiment?"

Harry clutched the colonel's arm for support. "He lived here, I believe; can we go in to see him?"

"I'm afraid not, your Honor; the doctor has been there for an hour or more, an' he turned every sowl of us out of doors as soon as he came."

"What doctor is with him?"

"It's Burnett the bye brought, though the pore crathur of a wife yonder sent him for O'Brien."

Even while the woman spoke the door of the house opened, and Dr. Burnett himself appeared.

"Is Mrs. Shaw there? I should like her to come in, if she is."

A woman, weeping vociferously, came forward, assisted by officious friends, all of whom the doctor summarily dismissed. His face brightened as he caught a glimpse of Col. Holcomb; "Hello, colonel! I'm glad to see you here; come in please."

The colonel entered the house leading Harry with him, though upon the latter the doctor looked somewhat askance,