

Bill's Purpose.

(By Mrs. Henry Crewe)

'I'll do it!'

The man who uttered these words might have been seen skulking stealthily along under a high wall enclosing a spacious kitchen-garden belonging to a beautiful estate on the borders of Surrey.

The hour was sunset. It was the brilliant glow of a fine evening that brightened all around; the reddened sky was reflected in flower and tree, giving them warmer tints than usual.

The leaves of the wood trees stirred gently in the breeze as this man crept on, his eyes turned towards the handsome country house, whose ancient gables carried the ivy of generations upon their surface, scanning every portion of it with careful and inquiring gaze.

He was tall and powerfully built, with limbs and muscles capable of work, that would have been the envy of many a man. The face had once borne a frank and honest expression, but now, alas, it was pale and emaciated. There was a wild look in his eyes that told of more than hunger and poverty. An observant eye could well read that bad habits and drink — that curse of England, as of many another nation — had done its terrible work upon Bill Saunders.

Presently the man reached an iron gate, an entrance in the wall towards the back of the mansion. Instinctively he drew back, lest any one should catch sight of his ragged garments. The next moment, however, perceiving that no one was in view, he pressed forward, and furtively laid his hand upon the fastening; but it did not yield to his pressure. The gate was securely locked. A dark look came into his eyes as they rested for an instant upon the peaceful beauty and luxury evident before him.

'I'll do it!' he said once more, adding a muttered oath, and feeling in his empty pockets. 'Why should a man like he, who does nothing, have a fine house and all he can wish for,' he ejaculated aloud, 'whilst my wife and children are starving? Ha! and I am starving, too' — with a bitter laugh, 'and haven't got a copper for gin. No, a man can't starve, just under the walls of the rich squire, too! He wouldn't care if the likes of me died at his door'; and with another oath he turned away into one of the wood-paths leading round the building, his heart full of wretchedness and godlessness.

Almost at the same moment Squire Norcliffe descended the broad steps leading from his front door in the company of a friend, the two turning in the direction of the wood opposite to that which Bill Saunders had followed.

'You have made many improvements in the place since I saw you last, Norcliffe; the gardens are looking more beautiful than ever.'

'Ha! I am glad you think so. You see, I try to employ as many men as possible.'

'Just like you — always thinking of others, never of yourself.'

'Well, you know, Burns, we are but stewards here below of that which God has given us. 'Twas his will that my dear father should leave me wealth, and it is my duty and my greatest pleasure,' he added, heartily, 'to devote that wealth, as well as my time, to the succor of those who are in less fortunate circumstances. I grieve to say,' he went on, 'my head gardener, a perfect treasure of a man, hard-working, sober, honest, tasteful, has fallen ill, and I have to be temporary manager myself. I fear his illness may be a long one, so I must find some one to work under me for a time.'

'Surely another head gardener is to be

found without your tiring yourself to this extent?'

'But I do not intend to look for one. Please God he will get over it; meanwhile we shall go on as we can.'

'And what is your present hobby?' questioned Colonel Burns, as he gazed smilingly on the philanthropic friend who, in his opinion, good-natured man though he was himself, went too far in his habit of self-denial for the sake of those whose gratitude was often but skin-deep for all he did for them.

Squire Norcliffe laughed a pleasant laugh. 'My present hobby, as you call it, is building a labor home not far distant, a refuge for tramps out of work.'

'Tramps!' echoed his friend in a somewhat stern voice. 'They are often dangerous fellows to deal with.'

'True; but we must not forget that they have many temptations that do not fall to the share of a man who need not seek his daily bread.'

'Their want of work is frequently of their own making.'

'That I must allow; but, it is our duty, and ought to be our pleasure to lend them a helping hand.'

Scarcely had he concluded his sentence when the fading sunlight that still illumined the road they trod was obscured for an instant, and in another moment Bill Saunders, who had just rounded a winding in the path, stood face to face with Squire Norcliffe. In his confusion the man strove to turn aside, but the brushwood around grew high; there was nothing for it but to make his way as best he could.

Both gentlemen eyed him closely as he approached. His appearance was not encouraging. The sight of them had aroused still deeper envy in his heart.

'Good evening, my friend,' said the squire kindly; but to this friendly greeting no response came in words.

Only a momentary glance of fierceness from beneath his shaggy brows rested on the man who wished to be his friend, as Bill strove to brush past him on the narrow pathway. The squire stopped.

'You appear to be tired, my man,' he went on. 'Is there anything I can do to help you?'

Yet no answer came, only the man stood still, and his head sank lower on his breast. Annoyed at his sullenness, and wondering at his friend's patience, Colonel Burns hastened on a few steps in advance.

'I will gladly help you if it is in my power to do so.'

What was there in that voice that impelled Bill suddenly to raise his head and meet the steady kindly gaze of Squire Norcliffe? Could this be the squire, he asked himself, the man whom but a few minutes before he had cursed in his heart, speaking with so much interest to a stranger, to one so dirty, so ragged as himself?

'Are you the squire, sir?' he gasped.

'I am. Tell me — is it work you are in search of?'

'I have tried to get it,' he replied, evasively, 'but —'

'You have not succeeded? Poor fellow! Have you a wife and children?'

'I have. They are starving,' he burst out, 'starving — and so am I,' he added.

'You shall not starve, nor shall you want for work, if you are trying for it in good earnest. What is it you can do?'

'I was a gardener once, a head gardener, — and a still sadder look overspread the haggard face — and lately I have been a laborer.'

'Ha! how came it that — But never mind, you can tell me all that some other day,' he continued, on noting the despairing look on his companion's face.

'I will give you work myself, my head

gardener is ill, and you shall take his place for the time being, if you can give me a satisfactory reference as to where you have been.'

'I served the Vicar of Bramleigh for seven years, sir.'

'What — my old college friend! Then I will take you into my service at once, at least, until such time as my man has sufficiently recovered to be able to return to me. Are you willing?'

For an instant a flash of hope lighted up the eyes that were fixed in wondering incredulity upon his interlocutor's face, the next, he pressed his hands before them and uttered a deep groan. Squire Norcliffe eyed him in pitying silence. Suddenly Bill Saunders raised his head and stood erect before his benefactor. There were tears in his eyes, but the voice was steady that spoke his thoughts.

'Sir,' he said, 'I am grateful — oh, how grateful! — for your great kindness to me, but I cannot enter your service.'

The squire looked up in astonishment.

'No, sir; if you knew all you would not take me. God help me!' he continued, as the prayer of former days when he was young and happy, rushed into his mind.

'I should take you. Tell me all; make a clean breast of it as we walk towards the house. It is food and rest that you need, my poor fellow.'

The squire moved forward, motioning to his companion to follow.

Colonel Burns was far out of sight, and there, beneath the shadowing elm trees that stretched their branches over him as if for protection in the growing twilight, Bill told his tale, with none save God to witness his repentant confession.

It was a tale of former happiness, with a loving wife and rosy, sturdy children; a happiness destroyed by himself, as, drifting into bad companionship, he had gradually become a drunkard, loosened his home ties, neglected his little ones and their mother. He told how, after weeks and months of warning, the squire's friend had been at length obliged to discharge him; how he had from time to time been taken on as a laborer, but everywhere been sent away as a result of his drunken habits. Sinking lower and lower the family had gradually parted with all their once comfortable little possessions, until, reduced to starvation, wife and children had been taken into the workhouse, whilst he himself had become a wandering beggar.

'My man' — and Squire Norcliffe laid his hand upon his shoulder — 'I am still ready to take you into my employment for your own, your wife's, and your children's sake. God will help you, if you ask him.'

A look of intense gratitude gleamed in the miserable man's eyes.

'Sir,' he said, 'I have something more to tell; something that will make you send me from you for ever, and then —'

Once more a flash of surprise was visible in Squire Norcliffe's countenance.

'Do you know, sir, what purpose was in my heart this evening?' — and his cheek grew ashy pale as he asked the question.

'I have not the slightest idea.'

'I came here, sir, to rob you, the rich squire, of whom I had heard talk!'

His companion started, yet gazed upon him with deepest interest and sympathy.

'Yes, I came to rob this house' — looking up at the peaceful spot with moistening eyes as he spoke. 'I was biding my time till night should come to find my way inside. It was for this I was waiting in the wood when I came upon you two gentlemen. 'Oh,' — he groaned aloud — 'what will become of me?'

The squire did not speak, his pity and emotion were too great for words.

'Can you forgive me, sir?' broke out the