

MRS. CROFTS' DILEMMA.

"Mrs. Crofts, Ma sent me over to ask how much money you would contribute to the missionary-box, 'sides clothes?" Freddy Barton burst in upon Mrs. Crofts, in her sunny kitchen, and delivered himself of this speech in a breathless manner.

"Missionary-box! What missionary-box, Freddy?"

Mrs. Crofts was rolling out a flaky pie-crust, that was to cover a pie destined for the dinner-table that day, and it was growing late; but, notwithstanding that fact, the rolling-pin came down with a soft thud and her hands rested idly upon it as she continued to stare steadily at Freddy, while the answer to her question fixed itself upon her mind, and fell, at length, from her own lips.

"So they have decided upon sending money and the box, after all?"

"I reckon they have," said Master Fred, wondering what made her stare so.

"You tell your Ma, sonny, that I will contribute just what I promised, three months ago, when that box was mentioned—clothing, nothing more. I have just been baking some gingerbread men. Take one! Benny declares gingerbread is so much better baked in this way," laughed Mrs. Crofts. "He always begins at the toes and eats up. Thinks that way tastes better too."

Freddy laughed merrily at Ben's conceit; and, pocketing the gingerbread man, ran homeward, calling out from the gate: "You are to hurry up."

Mrs. Crofts was not given to long, elaborate sentences in making her opinions and decisions known, nor to useless argument. She invariably held an opinion, however, upon most subjects discussed in her hearing, and expressed them in a brief, concise manner, when directly appealed to.

This missionary-box had been talked up months ago, and all had consented to contribute clothing; but many refused money. In fact, those opposed to the money scheme were in the majority; but the other party were decidedly the most influential—that is, as Deacon Day once mildly observed, they talked the fastest and loudest and carried the day invariably, in other matters besides missionary-boxes.

Mrs. Barton had at that time remarked oracularly: "There ought not to be a dissenting voice." It was positively wicked that any church member should refuse money to so laudable a cause. She could not see no possible reason. If there existed one, could it be stated? "Mrs. Crofts, is there a plausible reason for it?"

"I believe so."

"Will you state it?"

"Certainly. The debt upon our church, a large amount of which must be furnished very soon, and those who are really suffering here in our midst. The poor fund is exhausted."

"Dear me! Certainly. We have a debt upon us, I know; but so have many churches who still give largely, all over. Don't you know that?"

Mrs. Barton entirely ignored the latter part of Mrs. Crofts' speech.

"I do; but they pay their interest, or should. We do not."

"Yes, I—well, we did feel obliged to ask help this year."

"And last also," supplemented Mrs. Crofts.

"Yes; last year also."

"By sending money in another direction, just at present, we are taking it from those to whom it rightly belongs. Besides, there are those here amongst us who are almost starving!"

A dead silence had followed Mrs. Crofts' truthful, plainly-spoken words, and no further allusion had been made to sending money or a box to foreign missions; and that same night, Mrs. Crofts, after the children were in bed, had delivered herself of a speech of unusual length to worthy John Crofts, who had the utmost faith in every word she uttered, concluding with:

"I do believe, John, in sending to foreign missions. Heart and soul I am interested in the work and am willing to do all my hands find to do; but just now, considering the state of our church financially, I believe it is wrong, and in the face, too, of the fact that we can't raise enough to relieve the wants of one single needy family among us."

Mrs. Crofts had believed the matter abandoned, until Freddy Barton so unceremoniously announced it in progress.

Forgetful alike of pie and rapid flight of time, she remained standing where Freddy had left her, turning the matter over in her mind, and wondering why she had not heard of the fresh move in that direction before; and evidently the plans were in an advanced state considering Fred's parting injunction "to hurry up."

The old eight-day clock in the corner roused her from her reverie, at last; when she charged at the white crust with more spirit than was usually displayed in pie making by this worthy lady.

Upon the whole, Mrs. Crofts was too charitably disposed toward all erring humanity to feel aggrieved any length of time; therefore, when Ben and Bessie came in from school, with rosy cheeks and eyes like stars, she forgot directly that a missionary-box existed.

"Mamma, Fred Barton said you gave him one of our gingerbread men, and it was the very goodest he ever ate, and he began at the toes too, 'cause I do; and, Mamma, he said, if he had just another, he would begin at the head, and then he could tell 'actly which way tasted the best. Can I take him another?"

Mrs. Crofts laughingly assented, and a few moments later with Mr. Crofts, they were seated around the table, all

trace of the momentary vexation removed from the good little lady's face, and enjoying the meal as every meal was enjoyed in the Crofts household.

"I want bright faces at the table," worthy John Crofts always said. "Don't bring your grievances there, of all places."

And Mrs. Crofts saw to it that no one did. Mr. Crofts invariably had a good, wholesome, bright story to tell of something that could interest Ben and Bessie, and Mrs. Crofts never failed to make the most of every pleasant little event; and so it came to pass that the three daily meals in this household were the jolliest part of the day. Old Miss Frink, the village seamstress, who was there a whole week at one time, declared she like to died every meal-time, "owin' to the amount of laughin' at the Crofts' table."

This digression has no special bearing upon our story, unless it may be seen from it that indulging in harmless, innocent mirth at proper seasons is conducive to a healthy state of mind, and the Crofts were in the enjoyment of this state to a large degree.

The table was cleared at last; Ben and Bessie had run off to school half an hour ago; and Mrs. Crofts, in a soft, dark, clinging cashmere dress, with a dainty white apron, took up her sewing beside the sitting-room window, with the intention of accomplishing considerable before supper-time. Her nimble fingers were moving rapidly, when, to her consternation, she saw Tacy Shepherd shuffling slowly up the walk.

Tacy was the village tatter; at least that was the name she had striven with all her energies to earn, and she honestly owned it. There was this excuse for her, however, she lived with an aunt who retailed gossip for a livelihood. In plainer parlance, she rarely lost by telling a good story, reflecting credit upon her author, and in nine cases out of a dozen returned to her whitewashed hut, just out of town, the richer by a loaf of bread, a pie, and other substantial, chuckling inwardly at the success of her story, of which a quarter rarely that—ever possessed a grain of truth.

This was poor Tacy's bringing up; and, having been an apt scholar, at the age of twelve she was a dread and a pest in every well-regulated household.

Mrs. Crofts saw with dismay it was Tacy, and wondered what it could be that brought her, as she so rarely came.

"Well, Tacy?"

"Good-day, Ma'm. Ben and Bessie off to scho'?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Crofts, inwardly thankful.

"Mis' Barton's goin' to send off a box and money to them folks in—in Ingy."

"So Freddy told me, this morning."

"I've come for your donate, Mis' Crofts."

"You, Tacy!"

"Yes'm. I've been goin' around all day after the things."

"Is that so? Very well, then, I will look up mine."

Mrs. Crofts ran up-stairs, fearing to leave Tacy long alone, and hurriedly gathered together the garments she had intended to give, and, rolling them into as small a compass as possible, hastened back to the sitting room, finding Tacy seated just where she left her, craning her long neck for a view of her new hat in the mirror.

"I know you don't mean to give money, as most of the ladies are doin'. And Mis' Barton says them as don't give are mean stingy. And Mis' Blair, the wife of the man who owns the 'Weekly Chronicle,' she is goin' to give ten dollars; and I heard Mis' Blair say her husband was goin' to publish all about it and tell the names of all that give; and she said, too, if it could be made known it would almost oblige folks to give, 'cause they would be 'shamed to be left out; and Mis' Blair—"

"Well, Tacy, that will do. Run along with your bundle now. The ladies may be waiting."

"All right, ma'm."

Tacy ran off, wondering if Mrs. Crofts cared (she didn't look so), and then concluded to report to that effect, which she accordingly did; and, in consequence, Mrs. Blair and Mrs. Barton added two dollars extra each to their subscription, thereby benefiting the missionary cause, for which let us overlook the motive that prompted it.

Mrs. Crofts' work again lay idly in her hands. A bright spot burned in either cheek, and there was an ominous sparkle in the soft brown eyes, that rarely shone there, except under strong emotion.

"Shall I send over that money I have put by?" She spoke aloud, and the canary above her head set up a song that almost drowned her voice. For two months I have been gathering that together for the poor creatures, and intended spending it for them to-morrow." She was quite unconscious she was speaking her thoughts aloud.

"I do wonder what my duty is. Whom does this money belong to? Two weeks from to-morrow there is to be a subscription for lifting a portion of the church debt. John is ready for that, and I could send this money to Mrs. Barton, only it was saved from my household expenses, at a sacrifice too, for the Stover family, who are suffering, really suffering, and are members too of our church. Mr. Stover is slowly dying of consumption. Mrs. Stover ails constantly—starvation, John declares—and has the entire care of the sick man and that poor crippled girl, so she can do absolutely nothing of consequence toward the support of the family; and that burden rests solely upon ten-year-old Davy, poor boy! so hollow-eyed and starved-looking, working all day in the factory and trudging around at night with papers, and always a ready smile. It makes my very heart ache to watch him. It might be my Ben, now. Dear me! I did so hope to help lighten his burden; and I could almost see, in anticipation, the happy, hopeful smile upon the pinched, white face, and the bright flash in the sad eyes. Poor Davy! This money was his. Ought I to take it from him?"

Mrs. Crofts continued to talk aloud, until the canary, with a seeming determination to do so, quite drowned her voice; but above the song could still be faintly heard only this:

"I can't do it! They may send, and they may proclaim it in a dozen papers. This money is not mine to give them."

And so the box was sent, together with a large amount of money (Mrs. Blair's plan had worked famously), and the "Weekly Chronicle" did proclaim the fact in stunning capitals, and Mrs. Blair's and Mrs. Barton's names led all the rest.

Two days later, unseen save by "that all watchful Eye," the Stover household rejoiced over a good supply of substantial, that promised to keep the wolf from the door for several months, and Davy, with tears in the sad eyes, kissed the hand of his benefactor, so full his heart was of thanksgiving; and, as a tear dimmed her own eyes, she silently thanked God that only for a moment she had harboured the wicked desire to give where it might be blazoned abroad, remembering Him who said: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto Me."

Mrs. Crofts' gift to the Stover family might never have reached Mrs. Barton's ears, save for Ben's defence of his mother, a week later.

"I say," said Freddy, "I like your ma, some way, on 'count of the gingerbread men; and I don't like to hear her called stingy. I heard Mrs. Blair say she was, yesterday."

"Look here! Stingy? What do you call stingy, hey?" Ben assumed a pugilistic attitude. "Your ma and Mrs. Blair never bought a barrel of flour, and lots of sugar, and tea, and lemme see groceries, and mush for poor folks all in a pile, as my mamma did for Davy Stover's folks, the other day, hey? Did your ma? I guess not. If my mamma didn't give any money for that old box, I reckon she thought it wasn't of any 'count. She knows what she's about."

Fred, being considerably alarmed at Ben's vehemence, observed a discreet silence, and proceeded homeward, telling his mother, directly as he entered the house, Mrs. Crofts couldn't be stingy, for she must have bought as much for the Stover family as Mrs. Blair's old box was worth.

"To think," mused Mrs. Barton, "she really had the money to give, after all, and didn't care a fig about seeing her name in print! I never did quite understand her peculiarities."

Freddy remains a staunch friend of Mrs. Crofts, enjoying numberless gingerbread men, without being able to determine, however, if it is the upward or the downward way of eating them that tastes the best.—N. Y. Independent.

JOHN BROWN, OF HADDINGTON.

For the "heroic" old man of Haddington, writes Dr. John Brown, author of "Rab and his Friends," my father had a peculiar reverence, as indeed we all have—as well we may. He was our king, the founder of our dynasty, we dated from him, and he was hedged accordingly by a certain sacredness of divinity. I well remember with what surprise and pride I found myself asked by a blacksmith's wife, in a remote hamlet among the hop gardens of Kent, if I was "the son of the Self-interpreting Bible." I possess, as an heirloom, the New Testament which my father fondly regarded as the one his grandfather, when a herd-lad, got from the professor who heard him ask for it, and promised him it if he could read a verse; and he has, in his beautiful small hand, written what follows: "He (John Brown, of Haddington) had now acquired so much of Greek as encouraged him to hope that he might at length be prepared to reap the richest of all rewards which classical learning could confer on him, the capacity of reading in the original tongue the blessed New Testament of our Lord and Saviour. Full of this hope, he became anxious to possess a copy of the invaluable volume. One night, having committed the charge of his sheep to a companion, he set out on a midnight journey to St. Andrew's, a distance of twenty-four miles. He reached his destination in the morning, and went to the bookseller's shop, asking for a copy of the Greek New Testament. The master of the shop, surprised at such a request from a shepherd boy, was disposed to make game of him. Some of the professors coming into the shop questioned the lad about his employment and studies. After hearing his tale, one of them desired the bookseller to bring the volume. He did so, and drawing it down, said: 'Boy, read this and you shall have it for nothing.' The boy did so, acquitted himself to the admiration of his judges, and carried off his Testament, and when the evening arrived, was studying it in the midst of his flock on the braes of Abernethy."

I doubt not my father regarded this little worn old book, the sword of the Spirit which his ancestor so nobly won, and wore, and warred with, with not less honest veneration and pride than does his dear friend James Douglass, of Cavers, the Percy pennon, borne away at Otterbourne. When I read his own simple story of his life—his loss of father and mother before he was eleven, his discovering (as true a discovery as Dr. Young's of the characters of the rosetta stone, or Rawlinson's of the cuneiform letters) the Greek characters, his defence of himself against the astonishing and base charge of getting his learning from the devil (that shrewd personage would not have employed him on the Greek Testament), his eager indomitable study, his running miles to and back again to hear a sermon, after folding his sheep at noon, his keeping his family creditably on never more than £50, and for long on £40 a year, giving largely in charity, and never wanting, as he said, "lying money"—when I think of all this, I feel what a strong, independent, manly nature he must have had.