



BY LIZZIE C. REID

**A** GENESE MARSTON'S small, nervous hands, that were never slack in the way of duty, were folded in her lap, the frosted nut-brown hair was ruffled upwards from her brows—it was a trick she had of thrusting her fingers through it while she studied the lesson for her class in the mission school. A mood of discouragement had crept over her as she laid the Bible on the table.

"What is the good of it?" she asked herself. "What influence can I possibly have over those wild lads? Can I ever hope to see life from their standpoint?"

She rose and stood at the window, her brow pressed against the cold glass. In truth, her head ached, and she was very weary with the week's work. It was a strenuous task to hold the attention of restless boys for an hour, and she felt strangely disinclined for it that afternoon. But it was not Agnes Marston's way to shirk a plain duty for the sake of personal ease.

In the garden the last autumn leaves were dropping yellow through the mist; the songs of the birds had a note of rue for the vanished summer; the dahlias were limp and frosted. One pink rosebud, that had missed its chance of summer bloom, hung a dank, dejected head; the sadness of the dying year fitted her mood.

Then, with a hankering after some word of cheer, she turned to the table and opened the Bible at random. The words on which her eyes rested seemed to give her the message she needed:

"He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

Her eyes kindled with a new courage. She was one of God's great army of reapers; she should have her share in the harvest-home.

"Bringing his sheaves with him, doubtless, with rejoicing," she murmured. "The imperishable harvest. God give me faith and patience to sow the seed and wait His time!"

She turned away from the silver mist of the garden, lit by the flame of the scarlet dahlias; the easy-chair and the quiet room had lost their charm in the fresh hope the message had brought her.

The fancy needlework shop in the High Street of Carrow Down might have taken the place as a unique specimen of architecture. A two-storey room, sandwiched between two larger ones, it had one fair-sized window for the display of the goods; all the others were narrow and diamond-paned. The rooms, long and low-ceilinged, extended from front to rear, looking out on the garden and the street; the upper storey jutted over the lower, and the customers complained of the uncertain light in the shop.

But the place was Agnes Marston's own property, won by hard toil, and she saw none of its limitations. A brave woman, with a simple faith in Providence, she was largely content, so long as the fancy needlework business prospered and she could pay her way, beholden to none. Her savings were safe-

ly invested at small interest, and, by strict economy, she could live her lonely life in comfort and occasionally offer hospitality to a friend. The modest little house, unattractive in its outward appearance, seemed to Agnes Marston a fit setting for her whose life had been limited and imbruted. She had come through much tribulation into her kingdom of home, and she was thankful for freedom and peace.

The past held shadows of haunting pain—a lonely youth spent under the tyranny of a selfish aunt, who had crushed every simple joy from the girl's life, and who, but for the hasty summons of death, would have left her penniless.

Love had come to her in one summer of utter bliss, and had vanished, leaving her doubly alone. Yet, in spite of all, she told herself she had much to be thankful for, and she was content. But, coming home from church of a night in autumn, when the golden harvest-moon hung over the red beeches and the stars were out, she took the long way by the high-road. Never again could she come by the field-path, where the moon shone on the ripe sheaves and the air was full of the scents from apple orchards.

The warmth of the afternoon was in the little school-house, making the boys more restless than usual. Only the quaint singing of lively hymns could work off the steam. The loud, unmusical voices thrilled through Agnes Marston's temples. The lesson was the Prodigal Son, and she told them the familiar story in a graphic way she had. Only one seemed to give any heed, and he was the one she called her incorrigible. The wildest of them all, she had despaired of touching him; and yet she had a special tenderness for him—perhaps because his bright blue eyes were like eyes that had looked into hers under the autumn stars.

The blue eyes were fixed on her this afternoon with a strange, rueful question in them. They gave her new eloquence, and by-and-by the others grew quieter and listened, too. Harry Bryce was always their leader in good or ill.

The old story of the exile in the far country and the cords of the homeland that drew him back had never held the boys as it did that night. Agnes forgot the throbbing of her temples, and went home in the chill twilight with the complete sense of a duty done against the grain; she had sown the seeds, and someday she might bring in the sheaves.

"Oh, if one soul in Anworth  
Meet me at God's right hand,  
My heaven will be two heavens  
In Immanuel's Land,"

she murmured. And it was for the soul of Harry Bryce she prayed that night.

Miss Charity Harding was the gossip of Carrow Down. A good woman, with an unflinching interest in her neighbors' affairs, she plumed herself on being the first to hear and pass on any rare bit of news. To do her justice, she was worthy of her name, being much better pleased to be the bearer of good tidings than of ill. It was on the following Tuesday that she called at the fancy needlework shop in the High Street to

match some wools, and, incidentally, to tell her news.

"You will have heard about young Bryce?" she began.

The wool that Miss Marston was separating into skeins fell in a soft pink heap to the counter. She gave her customer a startled glance.

"Harry Bryce? No; what of him? I have heard nothing."

"Ah; I hardly thought it would have reached you yet. I heard it myself only a few minutes ago, and I wished to be the first to tell you, knowing you take an interest in the lads."

"What is it?" breathed Miss Marston. "An accident in the shipyard? He is so reckless. Tell me quick—what is it?"

"No, no, not an accident. I knew you would be vexed, so I didn't tell you right off. The truth is, he has run away from home. It seems that the Hamerton Yard are paid on Monday night, and, after he had got his wages, instead of bringing them home as usual, young Bryce disappeared. He was last seen by a carter at Wyfell, who met him at dawn trudging along the high-road and carrying a bundle. I suppose to keep his courage up. It's a sad blow to his poor old father, and if his mother had lived till now it would have broken her heart."

Agnes Marston's eyes filled with tears of bitter disappointment—all the more bitter for the hopes she had been cherishing of her incorrigible. She had been thinking how best to arrest his attention by her next Sunday School lesson while she served her customers; and now he had gone into the far country—she had lost the most precious sheaf of her harvest. That was what she had listened so intently to the story of the Prodigal; the lesson of it had not impressed him at all, and yet perhaps it had. What was the meaning of that rueful question in his blue eyes? Ah, if she had only guessed what he meant, to do for him, to give her love. That was what she had listened to in the wilds, where, thank God, the Father-love could find him?

The sensation of Harry Bryce's flight soon died out; the waters of silence closed over the rash lad who had been only a disturber of the peace of Carrow Down. His father died soon after his flight, and only in one woman's faithful heart did the memory of the incorrigible hold its place. Agnes Marston's prayers went after him, borne by the swift-winged Angel of Love—and when have such prayers proved unavailing?

But changes were coming fast upon the little house in the High Street. Blockson's big drapery store opposite was floated as a limited company; it was to be a general store, where everything could be had from a needle to an anchor. The fancy needlework department had all the newest designs and the cheapest materials. It would have been too much to expect that Carrow Down people should sacrifice their own interests for sentimental considerations of friendship; only a few remained staunch to Miss Marston, among them Miss Charity Harding. The juggernaut of competition was marching on its victim. Prices must be lowered to compete with Blockson's, profits declined and bills increased. The awful shadow of debt hovered on the threshold of the little house; to Agnes Marston the shadow of death would have been a gentle presence compared with that. In truth, she did not know where to turn. She was too proud to own her trouble or seek the cold comfort of pity; she must bear the brunt as she had always borne it. She was drawing in her capital; it was melting away. The disgrace of failure was to be, after all, the end of her honest, strenuous endeavor.