



The Family Circle.

THE FLINTY SQUIRE.

By the author of "An Unexpected Legacy," etc. etc. in the "Quiver."

THE WALK TO CHURCH.

"Oh, uncle! I'm so happy, I don't know what to do!"

And little Ella Crawford caressed the bony claw which she held between her two soft, dimpled palms, as she trotted along gaily and sunnily that lovely summer morning towards the village church.

"That's right," said the Squire, relaxing the stern set look which habitually dwelt on his face; "but are you always in such high spirits on your birthday?"

"Generally; but I never, never had such a grand present before—a whole sovereign! Why, I've been turning it over in my pocket, and weighing it in my hand, and looking at it a hundred times already!"

"And what are you going to do with it?"

"Oh, I've planned it all out. Mamma is to have a real Russia-leather blotting-book on her birthday—that's this day fortnight; and papa must have something, but I can't think what just now. Daisy must have a new hat, Jack a cricket-ball, and the baby new shoes."

"Dear me! that's a great many things to get with a sovereign!"

"Oh, but mamma will help me; she says she has to make a sovereign go such a long way. But that isn't all. There's the little flower-girl's mother, who looks so pinched and white. I go and read to her sometimes; and she's to have something—a shawl for her shoulders."

"Well, and what are you going to have?"

"Oh, all the pleasure of giving them; it will be delicious! I can see how delighted they will all be. If you don't mind, uncle," she went on, "I should like a little run. I am so excited—I can't walk."

And so she bounded off amongst the trees, returning again and again to fondle the hand of her uncle, who knew so little of the pleasure of love and unselfishness.

He was a stern man: that everyone in the village knew, from the rector downwards. He was a hard man, too: that his tenants could tell well enough.

And although he had such a grand hall, and such a beautiful park, and so many servants, the pleasures of life were few and far between, the cares and disappointments bitter and deep.

It was rather a mystery to the people at the Hall, that Ella was there, for the Squire had had no children to stay since his sister had brought her little family, four years ago; and then the Squire was heartily glad to get rid of them after their months' visit.

The children cried at times, as children will do; they were noisy at others; they fidgeted their uncle; and the only one for whom the Squire had any liking was Ella, a child of seven, who was a quiet, loving child, and always found pleasure in sitting on the Squire's knee and going about with him, prattling the while in such a pleasant, garrulous way that she won his heart.

True, he had almost forgotten her after their visit; but, hearing she had been poorly, he had written, a few weeks since, to his sister, and asked that she might come down to get the fresh air of the country, under the influence of which she had greatly revived.

He had not asked his sister, or her husband, or any of the children, to accompany Ella, nor had he the slightest desire to see them.

At length the little girl was sobered by her active exercise, and came and took the old man's hand again, and walked demurely by his side down through the park, along the little village street, to the tiny ivy-clad church.

As they walked through the churchyard, the group of villagers lingering about at the porch, discussing the last week's gossip, made their way into church; whilst the sexton was apprised that the Squire was approaching, and stopped the bell as he came into church.

"The Squire's mighty punctual this morning!" he remarked; "'tis only just on the stroke of the half-hour."

"Ah! he's got his little niece with him," remarked the clerk, "and looks an inch taller and two inches more lively than he generally does!"

The Squire was saying to Ella, as they came into the porch:

"Oh! I see it is a missionary sermon to-day, Ella. You will like to give something; so take this sovereign, and put it in the plate when it comes round."

It was a sore trial to Ella to keep her attention fixed on the service that morning. Her thoughts would stray to the golden coin in her pocket, and to the delights which that sovereign was to purchase for her loved ones.

She tried her very hardest, but her thoughts would wander.

How calm and beautiful everything was, she thought, as she glanced at the old church, with the sunlight streaming through the colored windows; how she liked to hear the villagers' voices singing! how strange it sounded to hear them sing "Even the mune by night!" How restful and pleasant it was, after the crowded church, with its over-dressed people, which she attended in town! Then her eyes rested on the clergyman sitting within the communion-rails in the chancel. "That's the missionary," she thought. What a fat, happy, good-natured-looking man he was! He was rather like her father—ah! she would give her father a flower-vase: he was so fond of flowers. Then came a reproving twinge of conscience as she found her hand circling that golden piece in her pocket.

But she soon became deeply interested in others beyond her own immediate sphere. The preacher was telling them of Madagascar, where he labored, and the cruel customs which prevailed there in regard to children. Children born on two particular days in the year, he said, were sacrificed to their fetishes, or false gods. The little babies were either drowned or buried alive, or placed in the gateway at the entrance to the village, and cattle driven in, so that they were trampled to death.

Then he told them of those who were being taught the glorious message of the Gospel; of men and women abandoning their belief in fetishes and forsaking their habits of cruelty for the love of Christ; of mothers bringing their little babies to be baptised into the religion of Jesus; and of the hope and joy which belief brought to many a burdened and stricken heart.

"We are trying," continued the missionary, "to raise a sum of ten thousand pounds for the building and endowment of a school for native boys and girls. I have now been in England nearly a year, and have to return in about a fortnight's time. So far, I have been able to collect five thousand pounds. It seems almost hopeless to expect to get the remainder in so short a space of time; but God is all-powerful, and it may be that even yet he will enable me to accomplish my purpose. If people only gave that which cost them something—if they made some real self-sacrifice, if they gave up some treasured project, or denied themselves something which appeared almost a necessity—I might even now succeed in my hopes; and if they only knew the joy and peace which come from entire and whole-hearted surrender to the will of God—the peace which the world cannot give—they would be more ready to come forward and give, not only their offerings of money but their lives to God. What can be more glorious than seeking to save souls for our Master?"

During the sermon Ella's face had gradually deepened in thought as her attention became wholly fixed on the speaker.

Could a little one such as she help the work? she asked herself. It was, oh! such a beautiful work! Yes, her uncle had given her a half crown; that would do something. Then, when the question came of giving that which cost something, the shadow deepened on Ella's face. What could she give up?

There was only one thing in the whole wide world she remembered, and, with a sigh and a little gasp, the battle of self and self-surrender was fought out.

No, she could not do that; and her uncle might be displeased. That was out of the question; she put it from her. But the thought would come back again and

again. When she got home she would do some work; she would make a collection for the cause. But the preacher had said, "To give up our best and dearest hopes; to —"

Yes, she might give up her best and dearest hopes; and, oh! if God would accept it? If her heavenly Father saw and knew all about it, would it not be worth the sacrifice?

That day the churchwardens had a great surprise in the vestry.

A piece of paper lay in the plate; it was no less than £10!

"From the Squire," said Mr. Holmes. Her thoughts would stray to the golden pound in his life," said Mr. Prior.

"Wonderful!" they both exclaimed in a breath.

"Why, there's a sovereign too!" cried Mr. Prior. "Who can have given that?"

Then they went over everyone in the church; for they knew all, and they could tell about what everyone would give; and no one was likely to give a sovereign.

No; they went over each name twice, but got no nearer. It was a mystery, and could not be solved; the more they thought, the farther off they seemed.

"A new sovereign, mark you!" said Mr. Holmes.

"It's a good one, I suppose?" asked his companion.

They struck it on the table.

"Good? I should think it is! It's got the true ring about it."

"Well, twelve pounds five shillings and sevenpence-halfpenny is the largest collection we ever had at this church," remarked Mr. Prior; "and I feel proud of it."

THE WALK HOME.

The little groups of villagers who were congregated together, discussing the sermon and the latest news, stood deferentially aside as the Squire and his little niece left the church.

Ella no longer bounded along with the elasticity which she had displayed on their way to church; but, in place of it, a thoughtful expression had taken possession of her face.

She was thinking seriously, not sorrowfully, of her new sovereign.

"I'm so glad I gave it!" she was saying to herself; "so glad I could make up my mind to give it! 'Tis very little, after all; but it was a real sacrifice for the minute."

And though her mind would wander for an instant to the thought of the presents for her father, mother, and brother and sisters, yet each thought-sentence finished with "I'm so glad!"

Her reverie was broken by the Squire's voice.

"That was a very good sermon, Ella."

"Oh, very good; I never heard such a nice one before. I nearly cried when I heard of the poor little children who were so cruelly put to death. Isn't it dreadful, uncle! I hope the missionary will get all the money he wants."

"I trust he will. I gave ten pounds."

"Oh, you are good!" exclaimed the little girl. "Ten whole sovereigns!" she added, as if to bring more vividly before her mind the greatness of the sum.

"Yes; it seemed such a good cause that I certainly gave much more than I had intended."

"Ah, uncle!" she said softly, "you are one of those who deny themselves; and one of these days I'll try to be like you."

For a moment a conscious thrill of pleasure passed through the squire's heart. It hadn't occurred to him for years, that thought of denial for anyone's sake. He had had no one to deny himself for, and gradually his heart had become colder and sterner, and bleaker and drearier, until it seemed as if the treasures of love and joy and pity were to be stifled and put aside forever.

But this little girl was bringing back to him days when love for God and love for his mother were guiding principles in his life.

His pleasant thoughts ended in a vision of himself as he really was, and it troubled him much. Visions rose before his mind of Widow Jones, with her large family, who, after losing all the money her husband had left her by reason of the bad seasons and high rent, had received notice to quit from his agent last week; and of many a similar piece of crushing despotism

which this little girl's words had brought before him.

So he was glad to turn to her and say—"Well, have you thought of a present for your father?"

A shade of regret passed over the child's face ere she replied—

"No, uncle; indeed I haven't."

"Why, has he so many things that there isn't one you want to give him?"

"Indeed, no; only—"

"Only what?" said the Squire, seeing her hesitation.

"Well, uncle, I didn't wish to tell you, but I haven't got my sovereign now."

"What, lost it?"

"Oh no; not lost it. I gave it for the missionary school."

"What, your new sovereign?"

"Yes; and I'm so glad I was able to give it up? You see, it cost me something—a great deal at the time, really; but I'm so glad, because I'm a little like you now, uncle!"

And she was again the lively, loving Ella, skipping about and frisking along joyfully.

"You see, they won't miss what I was going to give them, because they didn't know it was coming; and I want some day to be good like you, uncle, and then I'll give ten pounds, if I have it."

But the Squire was very thoughtful walking home, very thoughtful, too, all day long, and at night.

The child had given all that she had for the love of Christ.

And he—what had he given?

So the days passed on, and the little girl grew dearer and dearer to him; and as he saw more into her unselfish little heart and heard more of her home-life, and of the pinches of poverty which they were experiencing, he softened towards this only sister, and the feelings of love which were not dead in his heart grew and revived.

A fortnight later, whilst his sister and her husband were sitting at breakfast, planning and contriving, as they often did, she was astonished to receive a letter in his almost forgotten handwriting, and on breaking the seal, read:

"DEAR EVELYN: I am very much enjoying Ella's visit, and hope you will not want her back for a long time, as she seems benefiting by the change."

"I learn, by accident, your birthday is at hand, and in remembrance of old times I want to give you a present. I can't tell what would be acceptable, but if you will spend the enclosed in the purchase of something I shall be glad."

"I really send it," he added, "in place of what Ella was intending to send you; so will you look upon it as her present."

"And what do you think the enclosure is?" she asked the husband.

"A cheque for five pounds!" he said, with a touch of satire in his voice.

"Five hundred pounds!"

To that struggling family it meant untold wealth.

And that was but the commencement of better times. Mrs. Crawford is now often at the Hall, and whenever the children want fresh air, they are there too; whilst at holiday times the Hall rings with the sound of merry voices.

But of all those who benefit by these things, the Squire is the chief gainer.

No one would recognize the kindly, pleasant, happy face of to-day, to be one and the same with that stern, suspicious countenance of two years ago.

But he knows to whom he is indebted for his happiness, and he fixes the date when the change took place, on a certain Sunday morning, when a child's one act of whole-hearted unselfishness wrought such a blessed alteration in his life.

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There is a certain missionary who is never tired of telling how, when, after a year's labor, he was still in want of the large sum of five thousand pounds, he received on the morning he was starting, from an anonymous donor, five one-thousand-pound notes in a registered envelope, and the only communication that accompanied them was a slip of paper, on which was written, "A Thank-offering." He has never had the slightest clue whence the gift came, and speaks of it as one of the many answers he has received to fervent and believing prayer.