

A MIDNIGHT MEETING.

I always did think my brother Solomon a little hard on me, though I confess that there was reason for it. Mine were not exactly his ways, you see; for mine were more the ways of pleasantness and his the paths of peace.

But could I help it that I was not born a parson, like Solomon. *Everybody* isn't born a parson. Indeed, I don't find that, as a rule, it runs much in families; and even if it did, you couldn't expect that two such parsons as Solomon could be born and reared in the bosom of one homestead.

A long time ago, when we were boys together in tight blue jackets, with gilt buttons and deep frilled collars, I used to try with all my might and main to imitate Solomon, and when we were exhibited in society I always echoed verbatim every remark I heard him make, so that I might share his fame. But that was, as I said, long ago, and gradually such close following in Solomon's steps grew tedious, so I chose a wider way. I was warned a great deal against this wider way, but somehow I lounged easily into it when I found how difficult it was to be always as good as Solomon.

After any particularly jovial evening at the Squire's or at Jo Fleming's at Blagly (the Squire bred the best fighting cocks in the country except Jo's, and Jo's whiskey was the primest that ever escaped duty), you may guess that my heart didn't bound with joy at the sight of Solomon's long figure and long face; still on ordinary occasions Solomon and I were good friends, and I looked forward to the day when he should convert me to his own ways, and we should read the book of sermons aloud by turns through our old age. But then I knew there was plenty of time for that.

Well, we had marked the fight of the season, and I had backed Jo's bird heavily. The little affair was to come off on Sunday afternoon, and for all the week before we were so excited (Jo and I and our chums, and the Squire and his chums) that we spent every evening together, discussing our birds and our pets, not to mention the despatching of a good deal of the Squire's home-brewed, and of my old port, and of Jo's Scotch. You see we didn't read so much in those days as you do now, and so spent more time over these lighter duties. We didn't talk very much either. One of Solomon's sermons divided among us would have lasted us all for a week; but we smoked—well, pretty steadily.

The Sunday came at last, and in the morning I sat in my corner of Solomon's pew, paying the greatest attention to him; for I wouldn't for the world he should know where I was going in the afternoon, or that I had the slightest interest either in Jo's bird or the Squire's. What was my horror then when Solomon, in the very middle of his discourse (I always knew it was in the middle, when he began to say "lastly"), alluded darkly to a "besetting sin of the age." "And he," concluded Solomon, and I felt his eye upon me, "chuckles with glee to see men so degrade themselves." I broke out into a damp heat. Could any one have turned traitor and told Solomon? I kept my eye down upon the carpet and tried to make a resolution that this should be my last cock-fight; but somehow the resolution jumbled itself up with speculations as to how the Squire would feel to-night when he was beaten, and how I should feel, when I pocketed my £100 winnings.

"I should certainly buy that colt of Jo's; and now I think of it, I may as well get Solomon a new umbrella. I dare say he didn't mean anything about cock-fighting after all. He always had whims for attacking our sports, and of course that innocent diversion must take its turn, like bowls and billiards."

I had forgiven Solomon by the time he had doffed his gown and joined me in the churchyard, and I only said amiably, "You were rather hard upon us all to-day, as usual, Sol."

"Was I?" he questioned, in his slow way. "Hard or soft it does but little good, Jacob."

I turned the conversation gingerly. I could not easily prove his words to be untrue, and it wouldn't be polite if I did—so I didn't.

"Good-by, Sol," I said with great relief, when we reached the parsonage gate.

"Shall I see you at service this evening?" was Solomon's most unfortunate inquiry, as he slowly removed his umbrella to his left hand preparatory to giving me his right.

"I hope so, but I cannot say I am quite sure," I answered in that way for the purpose of breaking it to him as gently as I could. I knew Solomon felt this sort of thing as sharply as I felt a razor scratch in shaving, so I put it that way, that I hoped so, but could not say that I was quite sure.

"I'm sorry you're not sure, Jacob," said he; "I should have liked to have seen you at church to-night. I don't feel very well to-day, so will you come in now and stay the afternoon with me?"

"I wish I could, Sol," said I as jauntily as possible, "but the fact is I've promised an old friend at Luckheaton" (Luckheaton lay in the direction exactly opposite to Blagly) "to go over and have a quiet chat with him. He is not able to go about much himself."

I suppose Solomon was shaking hands in his ordinary manner, but his long fingers seemed to me to have tied themselves about mine to hold me back.

"You want a new umbrella, Sol," remarked I, neatly preparing the way for the gift I had in store for him; and, I thought, turning the conversation with consummate tact.

"Do I?" asked Solomon, looking down upon the machine as if he had never seen it before in his life. "We both of us want a good many new things, Jacob—new habits, new aims, new—"

"Ah! yes, indeed we do," sighed I, cheerfully, as I felt the grip of his fingers relaxing. "You're looking all right, I'm glad to see. Don't go and fancy yourself ailing, Sol. It's a womanish trick, and not at all like you."

"No, I am not fanciful," he said tucking his book tenderly under his long arm. "Good-by, then, Jacob. I shall see you again some time to-night, shall I?"

Awkward, that query at the end, but I nodded yes to him just as if I had known—let me see—where was I? Well, Solomon and I parted very good friends. He looked back at me with a smile as I waited; and afterwards I looked back at him—with a smile, too, for the moment I turned a branch of his old pear-tree caught his hat, which he always wore at the very back of his head, and kept it; and he walked on to the parsonage door without an idea that his head was bare. I hurried on cheerfully then, feeling pretty sure I was safe. Solomon would be in his study all the afternoon, and in his pulpit in the evening. Then he would drink his cup of strong tea and sleep the sleep of a parson until morning, with

his lattice window wide open, and a square of the night sky exactly before his eyes.

"My sleep is calm," he used to say, "if my last look has been on heaven."

And calm I believe it always was, though his bed was narrow and short, and he—though narrow too—was long. Sol never could be induced to spend on himself any money which he could spare to give away, and so he persisted in using still the bed he had had as a boy. As for mine, I had been glad enough to discard it for a better.

Well, we had rare sport on that Sunday afternoon, and our bird came off the winner, though the Squire's was as plucky a little cock as ever got beaten. There he lay when the tussle was over, with his comb up and his mouth a little open, as if he was only taking in breath for a new attack; yet as dead as if he were roasted with stuffing.

Jo gave us a supper after the fight; then we despatched a bottle of port apiece over settling our bets; then we gave our minds to pleasure, and enjoyed a good brew of Jo's punch; and the Squire, though he had been beaten, was one of the cheerfulest of us all.

As it was a Sunday we determined to separate in good time; so when it got towards eleven we set out, while Jo stood in his lighted doorway shouting hearty good-nights after us. I had waited to make an appointment with him for the next day that we might conclude the bargain for the colt, so I was a little behind the others in starting.

"Take care of yourself," called Jo, "you have the most money and the furthest to go. Mind the notes. Five twenties, and I've copied the numbers that we may be safe. Tell the squire so if he waylays you in the dark."

This was Jo's parting joke, and when I answered it I gave a kindly touch to the pocket-book in my breast pocket, and the Squire, who heard us, called out that he daren't try to-night as there was a moon behind the clouds.

I was riding a favorite little mare who knew every step of the way between my own stables and Jo's, so I rode peaceably on in the dark, recalling the flavor of Jo's whiskey, and singing over one of the verses of a song the Squire had given us:

With five pounds your standing wages,
You shall daintily be fed;
Bacon, beans, salt beef, cabb-ages,
Buttermilk and barley-bread.

Suddenly the mare made a deliberate stop, and roused me from my melodious dreaminess. Certainly at the end of this lane a gate opened on the heath, but then she understood quite well that she had only to lift or to push this gate, and she had never before roused me here when I had been riding sleepily home from Blagly.

"Steady, my girl! Why, what is it?" cried I, for she was shying back in to the lane, and behaving in every way like a lunatic. I gave her such a cut as she had not felt since she was broken in; and then, without a word of warning, she reared entirely upright; took me at a disadvantage, and sent me sprawling into the ditch; then turned and galloped back towards Blagly without me.

I was none the worse for my fall, only shaken a little, and astonished a great deal; so I picked up first myself and then my hat, and stumbled on to find the heath gate. I had my hand upon it, when the moon came smiling from under a cloud, and the whole level waste of heath was made visible in a moment. But the sight of the heath, in all its barren ugliness, was not what struck me with such a chill, and made my eyes prick and my throat grow apoplectic. I never gave a second glance in that direction, for there close to me, only on the opposite side of the closed gate, stood my brother Solomon. I could not have mistaken him if there had only been the faintest flicker of light. There he was, in his long coat and his high hat, with his arms folded on the top bar of the gate, the brown book under one of them as usual, and his eye fixed steadily on me.

"Solomon," I said, growing very cold and uncomfortable under his gaze, "it's getting chilly for you to be out."

He did not answer that, and so presently I went cheerfully on: "I've been—you remember where I said I was going"—I stopped again here. I did not want to confess where I had been if he did not know, and I did not want to tell another falsehood if he did know. So I put it to him that way, intending to be guided by his answer. It was so long in coming that I took heart of grace to try another tack. "Where have you been Sol?"

Another pause, and then he answered, in his old, slow way: "I've been at home expecting you, Jacob; waiting for you until I could wait no longer."

"I'm sorry for that," I said, feeling a little chrier to hear him speak. "I would not have been so late only I had to go round by Blagly on business. I dare say you notice I'm coming from there now. I only went on business, Sol."

He made another pause before he answered, and, though it was a trick of Solomon's and always had been, I felt myself growing uncomfortably cold. Why could he not have stayed at home, as parsons should on Sunday nights?

But the icy chill turned all at once to a clammy heat when Solomon asked me quietly, and without turning his steady gaze from my face, "How much of that filthy lucre have you won, Jacob?"

"You—you have been dreaming, Solomon."

Unlinking his long fingers which had been clasped together on the gate, he stretched one hand towards me. "Five notes," he said, still with the unmoved gaze. "Five worthless, ill-won notes."

I clasped my breast pocket anxiously. "I have a little money here, Sol," I said, as airily as I could, "a few pounds more or less; and I want to buy you a new umbrella, yours is getting shabby. I'll go into town to-morrow and choose one."

I tried to get up a little cheerfulness over it, but Solomon's gaze damped it all out of me; and, besides, he had taken back his long, hungry, outstretched hand.

"Five notes," he said again. "Five worthless, ill-won notes, Jacob!"

"Even if I had the notes, Sol," I began, trembling like a leaf in a storm, "even if I had them—ha! ha! what an absurd idea what should you want with them? And—and," I added, clutching desperately at a straw of courage, "what right have you to them?"

"There is no right in the question," said Solomon, and his face grew longer and longer. "It is all wrong."

"You don't often joke, Sol," said I pretty bravely, though I was trembling like any number of aspens, "but of course you're joking now, and it's rather late for a joke, isn't it? Come along home with me."

"I'm not going your way now," he answered.

"Shall you be home to-night?" I asked, trying to finish up the scene in my natural tones.

"To-night! It is midnight now."

"God bless my soul, is it really?" I exclaimed, not so much surprised as ridiculously, flurried and nervous under my brother's intent gaze.

Solomon had shivered as the words passed my lips, and for the first time he looked away.

"Good-night," he said, in his slow, absent way; and then I think he added three other words, which he often did add to his good-byes; but he spoke so low that I scarcely heard, and I felt so angry with him, too, that I didn't even try to hear.

I walked on moodily across the heath. All the benign effects of Jo's punch had evaporated; all the pleasure of the sport had been swept away in one chill blast; the only definite idea that possessed me was the determination not to buy my brother Solomon a new umbrella.

I always carried my own key, and forbade the servants to sit up for me, so you may guess I was surprised to find my groom watching for me at the gate.

"Walking, sir?" he exclaimed, meeting me with a hurried step and worried face. "I hoped you'd ride home that you might be the quicker at the parsonage. They've sent for you twenty times at least, sir. Mr. Solomon—"

"I know," I interrupted; "Mr. Solomon is missing. I've just met him. I'll go and tell them so, for I'll be bound the parish is all up in arms."

All the parish was up in arms and had all gathered at the parsonage, as it seemed to me; but strangest of all—Solomon was there too, lying on his narrow bed opposite the open window, with the square of moonlit sky before his closed eyes.

They tell me something about a swoon or some such womanish trick, and it may be true and it may not. At any rate, I remember nothing after the first few sentences they uttered. Solomon had been ailing for some time—so the words went—and had felt worse than usual that day, and lonely and restless. Still he had insisted on preaching in the evening, and afterwards had toiled up to my house to see if I had returned. Just once he had risen excitedly in bed, then his strength had failed; and those who were listening heard him bid his brother good-night, with the whispered prayer, "God bless you." Then he had lain quietly back with his fading eyes upon that glimpse of heaven beyond the lattice-window, and died quietly at midnight.

What? The money? Don't ask me what became of the money. Over those five notes I worried myself at last into the most serious brain fever that ever man came back from into life again. They were gone. No trace could I ever find of my old pocket-book, though I made it well known that the numbers of the notes had been taken. When I had offered £50 reward and that he did not bring them I doubled it and offered one hundred. Who would care to keep them then? Who would keep five notes which were stopped, when they could receive five available ones of equal value by only bringing the worthless old pocket-book to me? But no one brought it, and then I advertised anew, offering £150 reward for those five £20 notes. Of course I tried to make out that it was the old pocket-book that I set the value on, but after all I didn't much care who had the laugh against me if I could only set this matter straight, and give it an air of daylight reality. But no—~~that~~ never brought them.

Another cock-fight? No, I never saw another cock-fight. Don't ask me any more. It's five-and-thirty years ago—let it rest.

A WORD FOR THE UNMARRIED.

Mrs. Horace Mann has an appreciative and sensible review of Dr. Clarke's "Sex in Education" in the *Herald of Health* for February. In the course of her paper she has a good word for the unmarried women, of whom there are so many, and is likely to be a great many more. She says:

"I believe it is a fact that the higher the state of civilization and refinement the more unmarried women there are, and yet Dr. Clarke could add his voice to the vulgar hue and cry against them. Such is the prevalence of this hue and cry that women who are not elevated above its influence by early inculcations of noble principles of self-respect, and of a lofty ideal, rush into matrimony because they are ashamed to appear to be unsought."

"The maternal feeling is as intense and pure in many unmarried women as in their married sisters. Indeed, if we each take an observation in our own circle we shall see it far more developed in many of them than in many married women, to whom children are a burden and a hindrance, and always considered and treated as if of secondary importance to their pleasures, and even to their more rational pursuits. The world cannot be divided in that way. The maternal sentiment is planted in the heart of every sympathetic and affectionate woman—indeed woman is abnormal without it—and if not developed by maternity itself, this sentiment may be so by right education, and thus saved from becoming a root of bitterness such as opinions like Dr. Clarke's are calculated to plant. How many an orphan child has found the very essence of motherly feeling and life-long devotion in a maiden aunt? The man is to be pitied who has not seen this in his acquaintance with society; one almost wishes to cite names to prove one's words. Has Dr. Clarke no touchstone within himself to prove such characters? For he must have seen many of them. The maternal feeling is often more judiciously exercised where the passion of maternity—what some moralists have called brute maternity—has not been roused into activity by actual motherhood. I would further explain this by a reference to those mothers in whom every other sentiment, even that of good wifehood, is absorbed by the maternal feeling, and where, if they are undisciplined in mind, this feeling makes it impossible for them to see the faults of their children, or to allow any one else to note them, or give them any aid in their correction. Even the father is deprived of his natural right to share in the care, and is treated as their natural enemy if he criticises them. The loving but unimpassioned aunt, or co-operating educator, whose maternal feeling has been cultivated by her vocation, can see the facts more clearly than such mothers, and can often suggest the remedies. I think it may safely be asserted that the first proof of improvement in the popular feeling about marriage will be the respect for those unmarried women whose independent lives bear the noble fruits of culture, benevolence, and devotion to human improvement. Dr. Clarke misses the truth greatly also in asserting that the advocacy of