

## CHAPTER XVII.

**I CHANGE MY RELIGIOUS VIEWS TO CONFORM WITH MY MORAL PRACTICE, AND AM GRADUATED WITHOUT HONORS.**

FROM the first hour of my direct violation of my conscience, there began, almost imperceptibly at first, a change of my views of religious doctrine and obligation. It was one of the necessities of my position. Retaining the strict notions of my childhood and younger youth, I should not have enjoyed a moment of peace; and my mind involuntarily went to work to reconcile my opinions to my looser life. It was necessary to bring my convictions and my conscience into harmony with my conduct, else the warfare within me would have been unendurable. The first change related to duty. It seemed to me that God, remembering that I was dust, and that I was peculiarly weak under specific temptations, would be less rigid in his requirements of me than I had formerly supposed. As this conclusion seemed to make him more lovable to me, I permitted it to deceive me wholly. Then there was something which flattered me in being considered less "blue" than the majority of those who made a profession of religion. It was pleasant to be liberal, for liberality carried no condemnation with it of the careless life around me.

But this was not all. It was only the open gate at which I entered a wide field of doubt. All my religious opinions took on an air of unreality. The old, implicit faith which, like an angel with a sword of flame, had stood at the door of my heart, comforting me with its presence, and keeping at a distance all the shapes of unbelief, took its flight, and the dark band gathered closer, with a thousand questions and suggestions. Was there a God? Was the God whom I had learned to worship anything more than a figment of conspiring im-

aginations? If He were more than this, had he revealed himself in words? Was Jesus Christ a historical character or a myth? Was there any such thing, after all, as personal accountability? Was the daily conduct of so insignificant a person as myself of the slightest moment to a Being who held an infinite universe in charge? Who knew that the soul was immortal, and that its condition here bore any relation to its condition there? Was not half of that which I had looked upon as sin, made sin only by a conscience wrongly educated? Was drinking wine a sin in itself? If not, why had it so wounded me? Other consciences did not condemn an act which had cost me my peace and self-respect. Who knew but that a thousand things which I had considered wrong were only wrong because I so considered them? After all my pains-taking and my prayers, had I been anything better than a slave to a conscience perverted or insufficiently informed?

The path from an open violation of conscience to a condition of religious doubt, is as direct as that which leads to heaven. It was so in my case, and the observation of a long life has shown me that it is so in every case. Just in the proportion that my practice degenerated did my views become modified to accommodate themselves to my life.

I said very little about the changes going on in my mind, except to my faithful companion and friend, Henry. When he returned from Bradford, he, for the first time, became fully aware of the great change that had taken place in me. He was an intense hater of sham and cant, and sympathized with me in my dislike of the type of piety with which we were often thrown in contact. This, I suppose, had blinded him to the fact that I was trying to sustain myself in my criticism of others. I could not hide my growing infidelity from him, however, for it seemed necessary for me to have some one to talk with, and I was conscious of a new disposition to argue and defend myself. Here I was misled again. I fancied that my modification of views came of intellectual convictions, and that I could not be to blame for changes based upon what



I was fond of calling "my God-given reason." I lost sight of the fact that the changes came first, and that the only office to which I put "my God-given reason" was that of satisfying and defending myself. Oh, the wretched sophistries of those wretched days and years!

I do not like to speak so much of prayer as I have been compelled to in these pages, for even this sounds like cant to many ears; but, in truth, I cannot write the story of my life without it. I do not believe there can be such a thing as a truly religious life without prayer. The religious soul must hold converse and communion with the Infinite or its religion can not live. It may be the simple expression of gratitude and desire. It may be the prostration of the soul in worship and adoration. It may be the up-springing of the spirit in strong aspiration; but in some way or form there must be prayer, or religion dies. There must be an open way between the heart of man and the heart of the Infinite—a ladder that reaches from the pillow of stone to the pillars of the Throne, where angels may climb and angels may descend—or the religious life of the soul can have no ministry.

In my changed condition and circumstances, I found myself deprived of this great source of life. First my sin shut me away, and my neglect of known and acknowledged duty. Then my frivolous pursuits and trifling diversions rendered me unfit for the awful presence into which prayer led me. Then, unbelief placed its bar before me. In truth, I found in prayer, whenever I attempted it, only a hollow expression of penitence, from a weak and unwilling heart, toward a being in whose existence I did not more than half believe.

I bowed with Henry at our bed every night, but it was only a mockery. He apprehended it at last, and questioned me about it. One night, after we had risen from our knees, he said: "Arthur, how is it with you? I don't understand how a man who talks as you do can pray with any comfort to himself. You are not at all what you used to be."

"I'll be frank with you, Henry," I answered. "I don't pray

with any comfort to myself, or any profit either. It's all a sham, and I don't intend to do any more of it."

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur, has it come to this!" exclaimed the dear fellow, his eyes filling with tears. "Have you gone so far astray? How can you live? I should think you would die."

"You see!" I said carelessly: "I'm in very good health. The world goes on quite well. There are no earthquakes or hurricanes. The sun rises and sets in the old way, and the wicked prosper like the righteous, the same as they have always done, and get along without any serious bother with their consciences besides. The fact is that my views of everything have changed, and I don't pray as I used to pray, simply because the thing is impossible."

Henry looked at me while I said this, with a stunned, bewildered expression, and then, putting his arms around my neck, bowed his head upon my shoulder and said, half choked with emotion: "I can't bear it; I can't bear it. It must not be so."

Then he put me off, and looked at me. His eyes were dry, and a determined, almost prophetic expression was in them as he said: "It will not be so; it shall not be so."

"How are you going to prevent it?" I inquired, coolly.

"I shall not prevent it, but there is one who will, you may be very sure," he replied. "There is a God, and he hears the prayers of those who love him. You cannot prevent me from praying for you, and I shall do it always. You and I belong to the same church, and I am under a vow to watch over you. Besides, you and I promised to help one another in every emergency, and I shall not forget the promise."

"So I am under a guardian, am I?"

"Yes, you are under a guardian—a very much more powerful guardian than I am," he replied.

"I suppose I shall be taken care of, then," I said.

"Yes, you will be taken care of; if not in the mild way with which you have hitherto been treated, then in a rough way to



which you are not used. The prayers and hopes and expectations of such a father as yours are not to be disregarded or go for nothing. By some means, tender or terrible, you are to be brought out of your indifference and saved."

There was something in this talk which brought back to me the covert threat that I had heard from the lips of Mr. Bradford, of which I had not thought much. Were he and Henry leagued together in any plan that would bring me punishment? That was impossible, yet I grew suspicious of both of them. I did not doubt their friendship, yet the thing I feared most was an interference with my prospects of wealth. Was it possible that they, in case I should not meet their wishes, would inform Mrs. Sanderson of my unworthiness of her benefactions, and reduce me to the necessity and shame of taking care of myself? This was the great calamity I dreaded. Here was where my life could only be touched. Here was where I felt painfully sensitive and weak.

A little incident occurred about this time which rendered me still more suspicious. I had been in the habit of receiving letters from Mrs. Sanderson, addressed in the handwriting of Mrs. Belden. Indeed, not a few of my letters from The Mansion were written entirely by that lady, under Mrs. Sanderson's dictation. I had in this way become so familiar with her hand-writing that I could hardly be mistaken in it, wherever I might see it. From the first day of our entering college, Henry had insisted on our having separate boxes at the Post-Office. I had never known the real reason for this, nor had I cared to inquire what it might be. The thought had crossed my mind that he was not willing to have me know how often he received letters from my sister. One morning he was detained by a severe cold from going, in his accustomed way, for his mail, and as I was at the office, I inquired whether there were letters for him. I had no object in this but to do him a brotherly service; but as his letters were handed to me, I looked them over, and was startled to find an address in what looked like Mrs. Belden's hand-writing. I examined it carefully, compared it with several addresses from her

hand which I had in my pocket, and became sure that my first suspicions were correct.

Here was food for the imagination of a guilty man. I took the letters to Henry, and handing them to him in a careless way, remarked that, as I was at the office, I thought I would save him the trouble of sending for his mail. He took the package, ran it over in his hand, selected the letter that had attracted my attention, and put it into his pocket unopened. He did not look at me, and I was sure he could not, for I detected a flush of alarm upon his face at the moment I handed the letters to him. I did not pause to see more, or to make any inquiry for Bradford friends, and, turning upon my heel, left the room.

I could not do else than conclude that there was a private understanding of some sort between him and Mrs. Belden. What this was, was a mystery which I taxed my ingenuity to fathom. My mind ran upon it all day. I knew Henry had seen Mrs. Belden at Mr. Bradford's, and even at my father's during the winter, for she had maintained her friendship for Claire. Could there have sprung up a friendly intimacy between her and Henry of which this correspondence was an outgrowth? It did not seem likely. However harmless my surmises might be, I always came back to the conclusion that through Mrs. Belden and Henry an espionage upon my conduct had been established by Mrs. Sanderson, and that all my words and acts had been watched and reported. As soon as this conviction became rooted in my mind, I lost my faith in Henry, and from that hour, for a long time, shut away my confidence from him. He could not but notice this change, and he was deeply wounded by it. Through all the remainder of the time we spent in college together, there was a restraint in our intercourse. I spent as little time with him as possible, though I threw new guards around my conduct, and was careful that he should see and hear nothing to my discredit. I even strove, in a weak way, to regain something of the ground I had lost in



study; but as I was not actuated by a worthy motive, my progress was neither marked nor persistent.

I certainly was not happy. I sighed a thousand times to think of the peace and inspiration I had lost. My better ambitions were gone, my conscience was unsatisfied, my disposition to pray had fled, my Christian hope was extinguished, and my faith was dead. I was despoiled of all that made me truly rich; and all that I had left were the good-will of those around me, my social position, and the expectation of wealth which, when it should come into my hands, would not only give me the luxurious delights that I craved as the rarest boon of life, but command the respect as well of the rich as of those less favored than myself. I longed to get through with the bondage and the duty of my college life. I do not dare to say that I longed for the death of my benefactress. I will not acknowledge that I had become so base as this, but I could have been reconciled to anything that would irrevocably place in my power the wealth and independence I coveted.

It is useless to linger further over this period of my life. I have traced with sufficient detail the influences which wrought my transformation. They have been painful in the writing, and they must have been equally painful in the reading, to all those who had become interested in my career, welfare and character. My suspicions that Henry was a spy upon my conduct were effaced for the time whenever I went home. Mrs. Sanderson, upon whom the passing years began to lay a heavy finger, showed no abatement of affection for me, and seemed even more impatient than I for the termination of my college life and my permanent restoration to her home and society. Mrs. Belden was as sweet and ladylike and cordial as ever. She talked freely of Henry as one whom she had learned to admire and respect, and thought me most fortunate in having such a companion. There was a vague shadow of disappointment on my father's face, and I saw too, with pain, that time and toil had not left him untouched with change.

My visits in Bradford always made me better. So much was expected of me, so much was I loved and trusted, so sweet and friendly were all my acquaintances, that I never left them to return to my college life without fresh resolutions to industry and improvement. If these resolutions were abandoned, those who know the power of habit and the influence of old and unrenounced companionships will understand the reason why. I had deliberately made my bed, and I was obliged to lie in it. My compliant disposition brought me uniformly under the yoke of the old persuasions to indolence and frivolous pursuits.

Livingston went away when his time came. There was much that was lovable in him. He had a stronger character than I, and he had always been so used to wealth and the expectation of wealth that he was less harmed than I by these influences. Peter Mullens went away, and though I occasionally heard about him, I saw him no more for several years. I became at last the leader of my set, and secured a certain measure of respect from them because I led them into no vicious dissipations. In this I took a degree of pride and satisfaction; but my teachers had long abandoned any hope that I should distinguish myself, and had come to regard me coldly. My religious experiences were things of the past. I continued to show a certain respect for religion, by attending the public services of the church. I did everything for the sake of appearances, and for the purpose of blinding myself and my friends to the deadness and hollowness of a life that had ceased to be controlled by manly and Christian motives.

At last the long-looked-for day of release approached, and although I wished it to come, I wished it were well over and forgotten. I had no honors to receive, and I knew that it was universally expected that Henry would carry away the highest of his class. I do not think I envied him his eminence, for I knew he had nobly earned it, and that in the absence of other advantages it would do him good. I had money and he had scholarship, which, in time, would give him money. In these possessions we should be able to start more evenly in life.



The time passed away, until the day preceding the annual Commencement dawned. In the middle of this day's excitements, as I was sitting in my room, there was a rap at my door. There were a dozen of my fellows with me, and we were in a merry mood. Supposing the caller to be a student, I made a response in some slang phrase, but the door was not opened. I then went to it, threw it wide, and stood face to face with my father. I was not glad to see him, and as my nature was too transparent to permit me to deceive him, and he too sensitive to fail of apprehending the state of my feelings, even if I had endeavored to do so, the embarrassment of the moment may be imagined.

"Well, father!" I said, "this is a surprise!"

The moment I pronounced the word "father," the fellows began to retire, with hurried remarks about engagements, and with promises to call again. It was hardly ten seconds before every man of them was out of my room.

The dear old man had dressed himself in his plain best, and had come to see realized the great hope of his life, and I, miserable ingrate that I was, was ashamed of him. My fellows had fled the room because they knew I was, and because they wished to save me the pain of presenting him to them. As soon as they were gone I strove to reassure him, and to convince him that I was heartily glad to see him. It was easy for him to make apologies for me, and to receive those which I made for myself. He had had such precious faith in me that he did not wish to have it shaken. He had left his work and come to the City of Elms to witness my triumphs. He had intended to give me a glad day. Indeed, he had had dreams of going about to make the acquaintance of the professors, and of being entertained with a view of all the wonders of the college. I knew him so well that I did not doubt that he expected to be taken in hand by his affectionate son on his arrival, and conducted everywhere, sharing his glory. Never in my life had I received so startling a view of the meanness of my own character as on that morning. I could not possib'y hide myself from myself;

and my disgust with myself was measureless. Here was a man whom I loved better than I loved, or had ever loved, any other human being—a man worthy of my profoundest respect—the sweetest, simplest, purest, noblest man whom I had ever known, with a love in his heart for me which amounted to idolatry—yet I could have wished him a thousand miles away, rather than have my gay and aristocratic companions find me in association with him, and recognize the relations that existed between us.

What should I do with him? Where could I put him? How could I hide him? The thought of showing him around was torture. Why had he not stayed at home? What could I say to him to explain my failure? How could I break the force of the blow which he must soon receive? I inquired about home and its affairs. I talked of everything but that which he most desired to talk about; and all the time I was contriving ways to cut him adrift, or to cover him up.

I was saved the trouble I anticipated by my good friend Henry, who, when he came, was so heartily delighted to see my father that the whole course of relief was made plain. Henry knew me and my circumstances, and he knew that my father's presence was unwelcome. He at once took it upon himself to say that I had a great many companions, and that they would want me with them. So he should have the pleasure of looking after my father, and of showing him everything he wanted to see. He disregarded all my protests, and good-naturedly told me to go where I was wanted.

The good old man had a pleasant time. He visited the cabinets, he was introduced to the professors when he chanced to meet them, he saw all that was worth seeing. He had a conversation with Henry about me, which saved me the making of apologies that would have been essential falsehoods. I had won no honors, Henry told him, because I had had too much money; but I was popular, was quite the equal of many others, and would receive my degree. I saw them together, going from building to building and walking under the elms and along the streets. That which to my wretched vanity would have



been pain was to Henry's self-assured and self-respectful *in*ar-hood a rare pleasure. I doubt whether he spent a day during his whole college life more delightfully than that which he spent with my father.

At night I had another call. Mr. Bird came in. I went to him in my old way, sat down in his ample lap, and put my arms around his neck.

"Arthur, my boy, I love you," he said. "There is a man in you still, but all that I feared might be the result of your circumstances has happened. Henry has outstripped you, and while we are all glad for him, we are all disappointed in you."

I tried to talk in a gay way about it, but I was troubled and ashamed.

"By the way, I have seen your father to-day," he said.

"And what did he say?" I inquired.

"No matter what he said: he is not happy. You have disappointed him, but he will not upbraid you. He is pained to feel that privileges which seemed to him inestimable should have been so poorly improved, and that the boy from whom he hoped and for whom he has sacrificed so much should have shown himself so careless and unworthy."

"I'm sorry for him," I said.

"Very well, my boy; and now tell me, has the kind of life which has cost him so much pain paid you?"

"No."

"Are you going to change?"

"I don't know: I doubt if I do," I responded.

"Has money been a good thing for you?"

"No; it has been a curse to me."

"Are you willing to relinquish it?"

"No: I'm spoiled for poverty. It's too late."

"Is it? We'll see."

Then the good man, with a stern look upon his face, kissed me as he used to in the old times, and took his leave.

Here was another warning or threat, and it filled me with uneasiness. Long after Henry had fallen asleep that night, I

lay revolving it in my mind. I began to feel that I had been cruelly treated. If money had spoiled me, who had been to blame? It was forced upon me, my father consenting. It had wrought out its natural influence upon me. Somebody ought to have foreseen it. I had been wronged, and was now blamed for that which others were responsible for.

Commencement day came, with its crowd of excitements. The church in which the public exercises were held was thronged. Hundreds from the towns and cities around had assembled to witness the bestowal of the honors of study upon their friends and favorites. Our class had, as usual on such occasions, our places together, and as I did not belong to the group of fellows who had appointments for orations, I was with the class. Taking my seat, I looked around upon the multitude. Beautifully dressed ladies crowded the galleries, and I was deeply mortified that I should win neither their smiles nor their flowers. I was, for the time at least, a nonentity. They had eyes for none but those who had won the right to admiration.

At my right I saw a figure which I thought to be that of an acquaintance. His head was turned from me, while he conversed with a strikingly beautiful girl at his side. He looked towards the stage at last, and then I saw that it was Mr. Bradford. Could that young woman be Millie? I had not seen her since I so shamefully encountered her more than two years before. It was Millie. She had ripened into womanhood during this brief interval, and her beauty was conspicuous even among the score of beauties by which she was surrounded.

The orators came and went, receiving their tributes of applause from the audience, and of flowers from their friends; but I had no eyes for any one but Millie. I could regard her without hinderance, for she did not once look at me. I had always carried the thought of her in my heart. The little talks we had had together had been treasured in my memory among its choicest possessions. She had arrived at woman's estate, and I had now no laurels to lay at her feet. This was the one



pungent drop of gall in my cup of wormwood, for then and there I acknowledged to myself that in a vague way I had associated her in my imagination with all my future life. When I had dreamed of one who should sit in Mrs. Sanderson's chair, after she had passed away, it was always Millie. I had not loved her with a man's love, but my heart was all open toward her, ready to kindle in her smile or the glance of her marvelous eyes. I knew there was only one whom she had come to see, and rejoiced in the thought that she could be nothing more to him than a friend, yet I grudged the honor which he was that day to win in her eyes.

At last the long list of speakers was exhausted, and Henry came upon the stage to deliver the valedictory. He was received with a storm of cheers, and, perfectly self-possessed, came forward in his splendid young manhood to perform his part. I knew that Mr. Bird was somewhere in the audience, looking on and listening with moistened eyes and swelling heart. I knew that my father, in his lonely sorrow, was thinking of his disappointment in me and my career. I knew that Mr. Bradford and Millie were regarding Henry with a degree of pride and gratification which, for the moment, shut me out of their minds. As his voice rang out over the vast congregation, and cheer after cheer greeted his splendid periods, I bent my head with shame; and tears that had long been strangers to my eyes fell unbidden down my cheeks. I inwardly cursed my indolence, my meanness, and the fortune which had enervated and spoiled me.

As Henry made his bow in retiring, there was a long-continued and universal burst of applause, and a rain of bouquets upon the platform which half-bewildered him. I watched for the Bradfords, and the most beautiful bouquet of all was handed by Millie to her father and tossed by him at Henry's feet. He picked up all the others, then raised this to his lips, and, looking up at the gallery, made a profound bow to the giver and retired. Knowing that with my quicker brain it had been in my power to win that crowning honor, and that it was irrevocably

cably lost to me, the poor diploma that came to me among the others of my class gave me no pleasure.

I knew that the young woman was right. She was true to her womanly instincts, and had no honors to bestow except upon the worker and the hero. The man who had demonstrated his manhood won the honor of her womanhood. Henry was everything; I was nothing. "The girl is right," I said to myself, "and some time she shall know that the stuff she worships is in me."

A young man rarely gets a better vision of himself than that which is reflected from a true woman's eyes, for God himself sits behind them. That which a man was intended to be is that which unpurged womanhood demands that he shall be. I felt at the moment that a new motive had been born in me, and that I was not wholly shorn of power and the possibilities of heroic life.

Before we left New Haven, Mr. Bradford, Mr. Bird, and my father met by appointment. What their business was I did not know, but I had little doubt that it related to me. I was vexed by the thought, but I was too proud to ask any questions. I hoped that the whole Bradford party would find themselves in the same conveyance on the way home; but on the morning following Commencement, my father, Henry, and myself took our seats in the coach, and Mr. Bradford and Millie were left behind. I had not spoken to either of them. I did not like to call upon Millie, and her father had not sought me.

I was not disposed to talk, and all the conversation was carried on by my father and Henry. I saw that the young man had taken a warm place near my father's heart—that they understood and appreciated one another perfectly. Remembering what an idol I had been, and how cruelly I had defaced my own lineaments and proved myself unworthy of the worship, a vision of this new friendship was not calculated to increase my happiness. But I was full of my plans. I would win Millie Bradford's respect or I would die. My imagination constructed



all sorts of impossible situations in which I was to play the part of hero, and compel her admiration. I would devote myself to labor; I would acquire a profession; I would achieve renown; I would become an orator; I would win office; I would wrench a bough from the highest laurel, and, dashing it at her feet, say: "There! I have earned your approval and your smile; give them to me!"

The practical power that resides in this kind of vamping is readily appreciated. I had at last my opportunity to demonstrate my possession of heroism, but it did not come in the form I anticipated and hoped for.

Our welcome home was cordial. My poor mother thought I had grown thin, and was afraid I had studied too much. The unintended sarcasm did not reassure me. Henry and Claire were happy, and I left the beloved group to seek my own lonelier home. There I manifested a delight I did not feel. I tossed my diploma into Mrs. Sanderson's lap, and lightly told her that there was the bit of sheepskin which had cost her so much. Mrs. Belden congratulated me, and the two women were glad to have me at home. I spent the evening with them, and led the conversation, so far as I could, into channels that diverted their minds from uncomfortable inquiries.

Our life soon took on the old habits, and I heartily tried to make myself tributary to the comfort and happiness of the house. Poor old Jenks was crippled with rheumatism, and while he was made to believe that the domestic establishment could not be operated without him, he had in reality become a burden. As the weather grew intensely hot, and Mrs. Sanderson showed signs of weakness, Mrs. Belden took her away to the seaside again, leaving me once more the master of The Mansion.

A little incident occurred on the morning of Mrs. Sanderson's departure which left an uncomfortable impression upon my mind. She went into the dining-room, and closed the door behind her. As the carriage was waiting for her, I unthinkingly opened the door, and found her before the picture. The tears were on her cheeks, and she looked pale and distressed.

I impulsively put my arm around her, bent down and kissed her, and led her away. As I did this, I determined that I would find out the secret of that picture if I could. I was old enough to be trusted with it, and I would have it. I did not doubt that many in the town could tell me all about it, though I knew there were reasons connected with my relations to Mrs. Sanderson which had thus far forbidden them to speak to me about it.