

"What is it?"

"Father, I have been put out of college and expelled from the church."

How loud sounded the minute noises of the fire — the clocks — the blows of an axe at the woodpile — the lowing of a cow at the barn.

"For what?"

The question was put at length in a voice flat and dead. It summed up a lifetime of failure and admitted it. After an interval it was put again: —

"For what?"

"I do not believe the Bible any longer. I do not believe in Christianity."

"Oh, don't do *that*!"

The cry proceeded from David's mother, who crossed quickly and sat beside her husband, holding his hand, perhaps not knowing her own motive.

This, then, was the end of hope and pride, the reward of years of self-denial, the insult to all this poverty. For the time, even the awful nature of his avowal made no impression.

After a long silence, the father asked feebly: —

"*Why have you come back here?*"

Suddenly he rose, and striding across to his son, struck him one blow with his mind: —

"*Oh, I always knew there was nothing in you!*"

It was a kick of the foot.

## X

MORE than two months had passed. Twilight of closing February was falling over the frozen fields. The last crow had flapped low and straight toward the black wood beyond the southern horizon. No sunset radiance streamed across the wide land, for all day a solitude of cloud had stretched around the earth, bringing on the darkness now before its time.

In a small hemp field on an edge of the vast Kentucky table-land, a solitary breaker kept on at his work. The splintered shards were piled high against his



brake: he had not paused to clear them out of his way except around his bootlegs. Near by, the remnant of the shock had fallen over, clods of mingled frost and soil still sticking to the level butt-ends. Several yards to windward, where the dust and refuse might not settle on it, lay the pile of gray-tailed hemp, — the coarsest of man's work, but finished as conscientiously as an art. From the warming depths of this, rose the head and neck of a common shepherd dog, his face turned uneasily but patiently toward the worker. Whatever that master should do, whether understood or not, was right to him; he did not ask to understand, but to love and to serve. Farther away in another direction leaned the charred rind of a rotting stump. At intervals the rising wind blew the ashes away, exposing live coals — that fireside of the laborer, wandering with him from spot to spot over the bitter lonely spaces.

The hemp breaker had just gone to the shock and torn away another armful, dragging the rest down. Exhausting to

the picked and powerful, the work seemed easy to him; for he was a young man of the greatest size and strength, moulded in the proportions which Nature often chooses for her children of the soil among that people. Striding rapidly back to his brake, the clumsy five-slatted device of the pioneer Kentuckians, he raised the handle and threw the armful of stalks crosswise between the upper and the lower blades. Then swinging the handle high, with his body wrenched violently forward and the strength of his good right arm put forth, he brought it down. The *crash, crash, crash* could have been heard far through the still air; for it is the office of those dull blades to hack their way as through a bundle of dead rods.

A little later he stopped abruptly, with silent inquiry turning his face to the sky: a raindrop had fallen on his hand. Two or three drops struck his face as he waited. It had been very cold that morning, too cold for him to come out to work. Though by noon it had moderated, it was cold still;



but out of the warmer currents of the upper atmosphere, which was now the noiseless theatre of great changes going forward unshared as yet by the strata below, sank these icy globules of the winter rain. Their usual law is to freeze during descent into the crystals of snow; rarely they harden after they fall, covering the earth with sleet.

David, by a few quick circular motions of the wrist, freed his left hand from the half-broken hemp, leaving the bundle trailing across the brake. Then he hurried to the heap of well-cleaned fibre: that must not be allowed to get wet. The dog leaped out and stood to one side, welcoming the end of the afternoon labor and the idea of returning home. Not many minutes were required for the hasty baling, and David soon rested a moment beside his hemp, ready to lift it to his shoulders. But he felt disappointed. There lay the remnant of the shock. He had worked hard to finish it before sunset. Would there not still be time?

The field occupied one of the swelling knolls of the landscape; his brake was set this day on the very crown of a hill. As he asked himself that question, he lifted his eyes and far away through the twilight, lower down, he saw the flash of a candle already being carried about in the kitchen. At the opposite end of the house the glow of firelight fell on the window panes of his father's and mother's room. Even while he observed this, it was intercepted: his mother thus early was closing the shutters for the night.

Too late! He gave up the thought of finishing his shock, recollecting other duties. But he remained in his attitude a few moments; for the workman has a curious unconscious habit of taking a final survey of the scene of his labor before quitting it. David now glanced first up at the sky, with dubious forethought of to-morrow's weather. The raindrops had ceased to fall, but he was too good a countryman not to foresee unsettled conditions. The dog standing before him



and watching his face, uttered an uneasy whine as he noted that question addressed to the clouds: at intervals during the afternoon he had been asking his question also. Then those live coals in the rind of the stump and the danger of sparks blown to the hemp herds or brake, or fence farther away: David walked over and stamped them out. As he returned, he fondled the dog's head in his big, roughened hand.

"Captain," he said, "are you hungry?"

All at once he was attracted by a spectacle and forgot everything else. For as he stood there beside his bale of hemp in the dead fields, his throat and eyes filled with dust, the dust all over him, low on the dark red horizon there had formed itself the solemn picture of a winter sunset. Amid the gathering darkness the workman remained gazing toward that great light—into the stillness of it—the loneliness—the eternal peace. On his rugged face an answering light was kindled, the glory of a spiritual passion,

the flame of immortal things alive in his soul. More akin to him seemed that beacon fire of the sky—more nearly his real pathway home appeared that distant road and gateway to the Infinite—than the flickering, near house-taper in the valley below. Once before, on the most memorable day of his life, David had beheld a winter sunset like that; but then across the roofs of a town—roofs half white, half brown with melting snow, and with lengthening icicles dripping in the twilight.

Suddenly, as if to shut out troubled thoughts, he stooped and, throwing his big, long arms about the hemp, lifted it to his shoulder. "Come, Captain," he called to his companion, and stalked heavily away. As he went, he began to hum an ancient, sturdy hymn:—

"How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word.

\* \* \* \* \*

The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine."



He had once been used to love those words and to feel the rocklike basis of them as fixed unshakably beneath the rolling sea of the music; now he sang the melody only. A little later, as though he had no right to indulge himself even in this, it died on the air; and only the noise of his thick, stiffened boots could have been heard crushing the frozen stubble, as he went staggering under his load toward the barn.

## XI

WHEN he reached the worm fence of the hemp field, he threw his load from his shoulder upon the topmost rail, and, holding it there with one hand, climbed over. He had now to cross the stable lot. Midway of this, he passed a rick of hay. Huddled under the sheltered side were the sheep of the farm, several in number and of the common sort. At the sight of him, they always bleated familiarly, but this evening their long,

quavering, gray notes were more penetrating, more insistent than usual. These sensitive, gentle creatures, whose instincts represent the accumulating and inherited experiences of age upon age of direct contact with nature, run far ahead of us in our forecasting wisdom; and many a time they utter their disquietude and warning in language that is understood only by themselves. The scant flock now fell into the wake of David, their voices blending in a chorus of meek elegiacs, their fore feet crowding close upon his heels. The dog, yielding his place, fell into their wake, as though covering the rear; and so this little procession of friends moved in a close body toward the barn.

David put his hemp in the saddle-house; a separate hemp-house they were not rich enough to own. He had chosen this particular part of the barn because it was driest in roof and floor. Several bales of hemp were already piled against the logs on one side; and besides these,