

CHAPTER VII.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

Nearly a month had passed away, and Esther, to her great gratification, now saw some of her plans in successful operation. The Sabbath-school had met with no opposition, for the parents were only too glad to be free from the noise of their restless children, even if but for a short time in the day.

She had felt somewhat discouraged, on entering her day school for the first time, and finding it composed of scholars of all ages, from the youth of nineteen or twenty, and girls much larger than she herself, down to the lisping child who had never learned its letters; and her examination of the books which they had brought with them, as we have seen, only increased her perplexity, since hardly two had the same book, as they had taken whatever their parents had happened to have in the house.

She knew that it would take too long to procure books alike, even if the people had the inclination and ability to purchase them, and after a while had succeeded in getting her classes into tolerable order. She decided, however, that she must resort in a great measure to oral instruction, and soon had the satisfac-

tion of seeing her pupils interested, and she hoped, progressing.

The snow had come and covered the ground to a considerable depth, but as her evenings were occupied principally in preparing for her classes, the long hours did not pass heavily. She had made the acquaintance of the families in the neighborhood, and had found one or two possessed of considerable cultivation.

It was late in the afternoon that she was sitting in the front room, talking with her little favorite Sammy, when the door suddenly opened, and a young girl entered.

"How d'ye do?" said she, seating herself near the fire-place, and throwing back her hood, she shook down a mass of long ringlets. "Folks pretty well?" she continued.

Esther assured her that they were.

"I dunno as you know who I be," proceeded the stranger. "Wall, I'm Araminty Cornish—I'm a stayin' to Miss Williams' now, fur a spell."

"And how is Mrs. Williams to-day?" asked Esther, with a good deal of interest, for she was quite a favorite of hers, "and how is the babe?"

"Oh! They're both on 'em well enough! Miss Williams is rather spleeny, I think, to speak my mind, but spleeny folks alus gits along pooty well, I'll risk um. Her youngun's a fortnight old most, and she haint teched to do a livin' thing about house yit. There's Miss Haley, she's done her washin' and her youngun aint but four weeks old, nuther."

Mrs. Simpson now entered, and after talking awhile with Araminta, the latter remarked that she "bleeved she'd drop in and see Miss Haley," and abruptly took her leave.

"I'm goin' down to see Miss Williams'," said Elvira, as she entered, ready dressed to go out.

"I will go with you, if you will wait a moment or two," said Esther, and hastily putting on her bonnet and shawl, she started.

"I hope you've wropped up warm," remarked Elvira, "for it's snappin' cold out."

They walked on a few steps in silence, when Elvira broke out, "That Minty Cornish is the slimsiest piece that ever I see. She talks about Miss Williams bein' spleeny; all she thinks on is gaddin' about among the neighbors and standin' before the glass twistin' them curls of her'n round her fingers. I hed as good a mind as ever I hed to eat, to give her a good dressin' down, when she was talkin' so mighty nippant about Miss Williams."

Mrs. Williams' house was not far distant, and they soon reached it, entering without the ceremony of knocking, as was the fashion of the country.

It was a log-house, and the outer door opened directly into the kitchen, a large room heated by the usual great fireplace. The chimney was made of rocks, and a large flat stone formed the hearth. The fire had now burned low, and it seemed quite cold there. An open door led into a small bedroom, and a feeble voice said, as they entered, "Is that you,

Minty? I'm glad you have come, for it seems very cold. I think the fire has gone down."

"It is not Araminta," said Esther, entering the bedroom, and approaching Mrs. Williams; she noticed, as she did so, that she was shivering as if with the ague, and hastily stepped out to arrange the fire. Elvira, however, was already thus employed, and as Esther came near, said, "Haint this pooty work? To go off and leave a sick woman alone, so!"

Esther meantime was examining a compound which stood in a small frying-pan on the hearth, while Elvira asked Mrs. Williams "What under the sun she let Minty go for?"

"She went to get some milk to put in my gruel," replied Mrs. Williams. "I have had nothing to eat for some time, and feel rather faint."

"Good for nothin' trollop!" ejaculated Elvira, entering the kitchen again.

"This, I suppose, is meant for gruel," said Esther, "but it is poor trash, and I think we had better make some fresh."

"That's my mind," replied Elvira. "Trash! why 'taint fit for the hogs to eat. You go in and make Miss Williams comfortable, and I'll see to the gruel."

Esther complied, and was shocked to see, on re-entering the bedroom, that the flush of fever had succeeded to the chills which had shaken Mrs. Williams' slight frame, and putting her hand on the sick woman's brow, found it burning. She shook up the pillows, and immediately procuring some cold water, bathed with gentle hand the sufferer's fevered brow.

Mrs. Williams' cap had fallen off, and her long silky brown hair lay disordered on the pillow. "Poor child!" said Esther, half aloud, as she gazed on the fair young invalid.

Tears stole over Mrs. Williams' cheeks as she heard these words and felt the caressing hand of Esther on her head. She covered her face with her hand, and lay weeping silently. The babe, who had been sleeping, now awoke, and Esther strove to turn the mother's attention to her child by praising its deep blue eyes, so like its parents', and partially succeeded.

Elvira soon entered, bearing the gruel, and declaring that "there wa'nt a dish fit to be used in the whole house; she wondered, for her part, that they wa'nt all pizoned with the dirt." After a few moments' pause, she inquired "Where's Williams?"

"He went this morning to get some meal," replied his wife; "I expect him home every moment."

In fact, as she spoke, a horse-sled drove up to the door, and Mr. Williams entered. He came directly to the bedroom, and with a "How d'ye do?" to Elvira and a bow to Esther, approached his wife, asking her how she felt.

"Why, you look real smart," he said, as he gazed at her admiringly. "Your cheeks are as red as roses. But where's Minty?" he went on.

"She's gone off," replied Elvira, "and left Miss Williams all soul alone. I dunno but she'd a froze, if it hadn't been for me and Miss Hastings."

As if in verification of the old proverb, relating to the appearance of a rather suspicious person when he

is spoken of, Miss Cornish now entered, and to Mr. Williams' angry inquiry "Why she had left his wife so long?" replied "Lord! what a fuss! I just stepped into a neighbor's to git some milk." Then, flouncing out of the room, she muttered something about "some folks alus thinkin' they must be waited on by inches, and if she didn't suit, they might git somebody else."

She hardly deigned to bestow a nod or look on Esther and Elvira, as they passed through the kitchen on their homeward way.

"Poor Mrs. Williams!" sighed Esther, as they walked briskly over the smooth road.

"Don't you think she'll git up?" asked Elvira.

"I don't know," replied Esther; "I am not much accustomed to sickness, but I am afraid that it will be a long time first, if indeed she ever recovers. She needs careful nursing."

"Wall! I guess she'll have to git somebody besides Minty Cornish to give it to her," retorted Elvira, "for she hain't good for nothin', for all she thinks she's the biggest toad in the puddle."

Mrs. Simpson seemed quite shocked at the account they gave of their sick neighbor, on their return, and soon after tea, went to see Mrs. Williams for herself.

She found her in a high fever, and immediately dispatched a messenger for a physician, though the nearest one resided in Patten, some thirty miles distant.

"Wall!" said Elvira, "Miss Williams must be dreadful sick, for Miss Simpson haint no great friend to doctors, she's sich a good nuss herself, and I never

knocked her to send arter Dr. Plummer, 'thout 'twas a case of life and death."

The doctor shook his head ominously when he arrived and saw his patient, saying he feared that there was nothing which he could do to restore her to health.

"I fear," said he to Mrs. Simpson, "that she is in a rapid consumption. I will do my best, but the result is in God's hands."

But Mr. Williams would not believe so unwelcome an opinion. His wife suffered so little and seemed so cheerful that he could not think she was so soon to be taken from him.

"All you need, Nelly," he would say to his wife, whenever she spoke of her approaching departure, "all you need, in the world, is something strengthening; you'll get up fast enough when you get over these sweats and fever turns, that weaken you so."

"Ah!" she would reply with a sad smile and tearful eyes, "my days on earth are numbered!"

Esther was now much with her, for Mrs. Williams seemed much attached to her, and talked often to her of her approaching death.

"I have thought for a long time past," she said one day when they were alone together, "that I should never recover; and there are some few things that I should like to arrange before I die. My husband will not listen to me when I speak of death, and I must intrust my wishes to you. You will see, will you not, Miss Hastings, that my requests are fulfilled?" she went on, looking earnestly into her friend's eyes.

Esther signified her readiness to do so, by a mute assent, and Mrs. Williams continued, while tears gushed to her eyes, "I should like to live, for the sake of my husband and this dear child, if it could be so—but it is my Father. 'Let Him do what seemeth him good.' I hope I can say 'His will be done.' It is hard indeed to leave this dear babe without a mother's care!" said she, pressing her child to her heart convulsively. "Poor little helpless one!" she exclaimed, while tears streamed over her pale face.

"Remember who has said 'And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of them,'" said Esther. Mrs. Williams raised her eyes to heaven, while Esther continued, "'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom.' Can you not trust your lamb to the Shepherd of Israel?"

"I can, I do!" replied the mother, while a smile of holy trust lighted up her sad eyes. "But now will you not read to me some of the sweet consolations which our Father offers to his weak children?"

Esther complied; and as she saw the calmness with which her friend contemplated that great change which was so soon to take place, she inwardly exclaimed, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."

It was now late, and Esther rose to take her leave. Mrs. Williams took her hand, pressing it fondly, as if unwilling to have her go. "You will remember," she said, "to write to my aunt of my death, and of my child. She is not a Christian, and this will be a

heavy blow to her; but tell her that I begged her, as my last request, to go to Jesus for consolation. I have told you that she has been a mother to me, ever since I was left, as this little one will soon be, motherless." Her voice was choked, but she continued: "Tell her my dying charge was, that she should meet me in heaven, with the child that I intrust to her care. Will you do me this favor, Miss Hastings?"

"I will, indeed," replied Esther; "but do not fatigue yourself to-night; I shall see you often again, and you can then tell me all you would like me to do."

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. Williams, with a sad smile; "but we know not what a few hours may bring forth. Let me bid you good-bye;" and she wound her arms around Esther's neck, exclaiming, "we shall meet again in heaven."

"I hope so," replied Esther, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "and I hope often again on earth."

Mrs. Williams shook her head. "I have often thought," she said, "that those near death receive a warning from the death-angel; and it seems to me that I have seen the last morning dawn on earth that I shall ever behold."

Esther gently warned her not to give way to gloomy fancies; and, assuring her that she should come on the next day to see her, bade her good afternoon.

"Good-bye," repeated her friend, "we shall not be parted long."

Mrs. Williams' foreboding proved correct; for a sudden change took place in the night, and before any of Mrs. Simpson's family could reach the house, in an-

swer to the half frantic summons of her husband, she had breathed her last.

Esther's tears fell fast on the pallid brow of the corpse, as she stood over her friend; and there anew she consecrated herself to the service of Christ, and prayed that she might indeed meet the sainted one on high.

Mr. Williams' grief was almost overwhelming. He was passionately attached to his gentle wife, and had not, like her, learned where to seek true consolation. He repulsed all who endeavored to offer sympathy, and no persuasion could induce him to leave his wife.

"Dear Nelly!" he would murmur, and gaze with dry eyes upon the sweet face of his loved one.

Many of the neighbors gathered around him, gazing at him with compassion, not unmingled with surprise and curiosity, for such grief as his was new to them. They were accustomed to violent bursts of emotion, but this unnatural calmness almost terrified them; and after striving in vain to induce him to seek rest, several gathered together in a little group, shaking their heads ominously, and predicting that he would be crazy.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord," said a tall man, entering the death-chamber, and laying his hand on Mr. Williams' shoulder.

"It's Elder Rider," whispered Elvira, "I'm dreadful glad he's come. If ever there was a good man on airth, he's one."

Mr. Williams looked up at the new comer, and, pointing to his wife, said, "She was my all!"

"My son," began the Elder, in a deep, firm voice, "God has indeed come very near you, and laid his hand heavily upon you; but we should not mourn as those without hope. I thank God that she was one of the redeemed. I loved her," he continued, while he hastily wiped away a tear, unwilling that any should see his emotion, "I loved her as my own child; for," he added, "I trust that through my means she was brought to give her heart to the Saviour." He paused a few moments—"Let us pray," said he; and kneeling there, he poured out his soul in prayer.

Never had Esther heard greater eloquence. His whole soul seemed filled with love to God and man; and as he prayed for the bereaved ones, for the husband, "from whose dwelling the sunshine of his wife's smile, and the music of her voice, had been taken to make heaven more bright, and to add to its melody," and for the babe, "the living tie, which bound him to the mother, who had gone before, and whose purity and innocence it was his to preserve, that they might meet the glorified one on high," Esther's eyes were not the only one's in that room that were wet with tears, and Mr. Williams wept like an infant.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SABBATH IN THE WILDERNESS.

It was the calm and holy Sabbath, when all that was mortal of Ellen Williams was intrusted to the cold bosom of the mother earth. Many and sincere were the mourners there—for her gentleness and sweetness had won her many friends; and in so small a community, the death of one of its members casts a gloom over all, which is not speedily dissipated.

From the grave they went to the school-house, where Elder Rider was to preach. Though the house was a log one, it was none the less comfortable. A huge wood fire blazed upon the rock hearth, and its crackling alone broke the silence as Esther entered, and took her seat among the waiting assembly. The elder was already there; and, after a pause of a few moments, rising, said, "Let us commence the worship of God by singing,

'Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove.'

Very few present had hymn-books, but this seemed a familiar tune; for, as the preacher's deep bass voice commenced, he was joined by nearly all the audience. The hymn being ended, he read a chapter in the

Bible, explaining, in a familiar manner, anything which he thought might not be understood by his hearers. After this he said, "Let us unite in prayer." All stood up; and as his fervent supplications arose to the Author of every good and perfect gift, many voices joined him, ejaculating, "Lord, help!" "Hear, Lord!" "Amen!" and the like: and as he prayed that the solemn sight which they had just witnessed might lead many of them to put their trust in the Redeemer, that, like the departed, when the death-summons came, they might obey willingly, and, like her, be enabled to say, "Oh, grave, where is thy victory? Oh, death! where is thy sting?" many a sob was heard, and many tears flowed over rough cheeks, all unused to such a display of feeling. The prayer concluded, they sung a familiar hymn, after which the elder, rising, and saying, in a solemn tone, "Hear what God the Lord saith," announced his text: "Because I have called, and ye have refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at naught all my counsel, and would none of my reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity, and mock when your fear cometh."

"These words, which I have just read," said the Elder, "show us both the justice and mercy of God. 'Because I have called,' he hath said; and has he not called after us in times and ways without number? Hath not his hand been ever open, giving blessing innumerable? Seed-time and harvest have not failed, that your lives might be spared. Yea, even your lives he is lengthening out, while you are still

living regardless of him, as if there were no God. And when he hath found, that his constant kindness hath failed to make you give your hearts to him, then hath he drawn near, and laid his chastening hand upon you. He who hath said that he doth 'not willingly afflict the children of men,' He hath taken now from one, the child of his love, and from another, the wife of his bosom, and still you have refused to listen, or have murmured, and raised your puny arm in rebellion against the Most High. 'Who are ye, that ye should contend with the Almighty? He that reproveth God, let him answer it.' But, oh, my brethren, God hath done yet greater things for us, whereof we are glad," continued the Elder; and his deep voice was choked with emotion, as he told of Christ's coming, and of his pure life on earth.

He dwelt on his miracles, and pictured, while his hearers listened with breathless attention, the scene of the restoration of life to the son of the widow of Nain, and the opening the eyes of the blind. Then, after a pause, he went on: "And how did sinful men receive this spotless Saviour? Methinks I hear, even now, the cry, 'Crucify him! crucify him!'" Then followed a glowing description of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane, of his trial, and, finally, of his crucifixion on Mount Calvary. Groans and sobs were heard; and as he pronounced the last words of Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" Esther's eyes, too, filled with tears.

"And ye, too, are daily crucifying the Lord afresh," continued the preacher. "Ye, too, are rejecting the

holy and just One. . . And if God's mercy doth not move your hard hearts, hear now of his terrible justice."

Then followed a stern warning to flee from the wrath to come. The scene of the last judgment was portrayed with a masterly hand, and the preacher concluded: "'To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts,' lest he 'also laugh at your calamity and mock when your fear cometh.'"

The Elder then sat down, first saying, "There's liberty, brethren!" There was a short pause, when a tall man got up and remarked that he "could witness to the truth of what had been said. Every word on it's truth," he went on. "Gospel truth, and I hope that the truth that we have heered this day with our outward ears, will sink deep into our hearts, and take root downward, and bear fruit upward, to the glory of God."

"Amen," said many, as he sat down. He was succeeded by another, who said nearly the same thing, though in different words.

But the people, who had listened very attentively to Elder Rider, now seemed restless, and twisted uneasily in their seats. A baby who had been asleep awoke and cried lustily. Its mother's efforts to quiet it proving unavailing, she rose and hurried out of the room.

After the last speaker had ended, the Elder offered a brief prayer and dismissed the assembly, first announcing that after a short intermission there would

be a conference meeting, which he hoped would be fully attended.

Most of the people now dispersed, with the exception of a few families who had brought their dinners, as they lived too far from the school-house to return to their homes at noon, and were soon gathered in little knots, talking of various matters with their neighbors. Some, however, went home with Mrs. Simpson, who, living quite near, extended a cordial invitation to them to dine with her.

Esther walked slowly home, thinking of the power of the preacher, of how often she had heard these familiar truths, and wondered that she had listened to them unmoved, as she had so frequently. "After all," thought she, "the secret of his eloquence lies in his earnestness."

On entering Mrs. Simpson's front room, she found Elder Rider there. He immediately began to ask her how she succeeded in her sabbath-school, and proposed that it should not be postponed, as Esther had intended.

"I want to see how you manage, my sister," said he. It was therefore arranged that it should be held directly after the conference meeting.