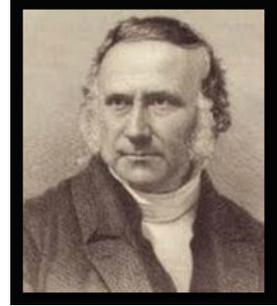


The Harvest Past



More than sixteen years have now passed away, since the occurrence, of which I am now to write, made its first impression upon me: but I am still unable to recall the scene to my mind, without the most painful emotions. There was something in that whole scene too horrible for description. And I would much rather, were I to consult my own feelings, pass it over in silence, and let a veil be drawn over it forever, than have the recollection revived by copying the notes made respecting it. But several of my friends have urged the publication; and I yield to their judgment.

I was hastily summoned to the bedside of a sick man, by the urgent request of his mother. He was yet a young man, I suppose about twenty-six years of age, was married, and the father of one little child. I had never spoken to him. I knew there was such a man, but I did not know him personally. His mother, who was a communicant in the church, had often mentioned him to me; and his wife, who was a woman of very serious turn of mind, though very modest and reserved, had sometimes mentioned to me her husband, in a manner that showed me, that his treatment of the subject of religion was a matter of sorrow to her. But I had no personal acquaintance with him. Whenever I had visited the family, he had either been absent from home, or intentionally kept himself out of my sight,—which, as I suppose, he had often done. Sometimes, but very rarely, I had seen him at church, not knowing, at the time, who he was. And I did not suppose he had ever been in church for

years; till, when I saw him on his sick bed, I recognized him as one whom I had seen in church, and had taken for a stranger. He was an industrious man, prosperous in his business, and as a man of the world, bore a good character.

His father was a Universalist, and the son had imbibed his principles. I had known this before. His mother had mentioned it to me, with much sorrow. She had also requested me to converse with the old man, her husband, and I had more than once attempted to do so; but he very soon excused himself by pretending, that his business was urgent, and he could not spend the time. I had also known him to leave the house and go off into the field, when he knew that I had called to see his family, and when he had good reason to suppose, that I would request to see him. I have no doubt that he did this, on purpose to avoid me. His son, who was now sick, had also, as I suppose, avoided me in the same manner. He still resided in the house with his parents, who had also another son, a lad about twelve years of age. These persons, with an infant child of the sick man, made up the whole household.

As I approached the house, I was startled at the groans of the sick man. I could hear them distinctly into the street. As I entered the door” his mother met me, calm in her deportment, but evidently in the most heart-rending distress. She looked the very image of woe. She briefly told me how her son was; and it was very easy to perceive, that she expected he would die. She did not wish him to know, that I had come at her request. She had not told him that I was coming. But she desired me to go in immediately, and converse with him and pray with him.

As I entered the sick man’s room, and as she called my name and told him that I had come to see him; he cast a sudden look at me, appeared startled, and turned away his face towards the wall, without uttering a word—as if he regarded me with horror. I approached him familiarly and kindly, offered him my hand, which he seemed reluctant to

take, and feeling his feverish pulse, aimed to soothe him, as much as I could.

He had. been taken suddenly ill with a fever, accompanied with violent pain in the chest, back and head. He was in the most excruciating agony, tossing from side to side, and his groaning and shrieks would have pierced any heart. He was a large, robust man, and his whole appearance indicated a vigor of constitution seldom equalled. His gigantic frame was yet in its full strength, and as he writhed in his spasms of pain, I thought I had never seen such an instance of the power of disease. This man of might was shaken and tossed, like a helpless leaf.

When he became a little more quiet, I inquired about his sufferings, and aimed to soothe and encourage him, expressing the hope that he might soon be relieved. In an accent of intolerable agony, he exclaimed;—“Oh! I shall die! I shall die!”

“I hope not,” said I, “by this sickness. I see no reason why you should not get well. And I think the doctor will be able to relieve you in a few hours.”

“The doctor has done what he could,” said he, “my time has come! I cannot live! Oh! I shall die!” And raising himself up suddenly, leaning for a moment upon his elbow, he threw himself back upon the bed and drew the covering over his face, holding it there with both his hands.

I again attempted to soothe his agitation, gently requesting him to be as quiet as possible, and assuring him I did not think, that the doctor regarded his case as hopeless. Whether he gave any attention to my words I could not tell; for he kept his head buried in the bed clothes, and firmly resisted the gentle attempts of his wife and his mother to remove them. In this manner he lay for several minutes, still groaning as in agony. I asked him several questions, but he made me no answer.

Thinking that he might perhaps feel embarrassed at my presence, after speaking to him for a few moments, I took my seat in another part of the room, and conversed familiarly with his wife and his mother, aiming to remove his embarrassment, if he had any, by proposing something for his relief, and by such an ease and familiarity, as should lead him to regard me as a friend. This had the desired effect. He gradually removed the bed-clothes from his burning face, and attentively listened to our conversation. With an imploring and despairing look, he stared at his wife, and then at his mother. Time after time, his fixed gaze was turned from the one to the other; but I noticed, his eyes never rested on me. He seemed to avoid looking at me. If his mother or his wife spoke, his eyes would turn upon them at the sound of the voice; but if he heard a word from me, he did not notice me at all.

I had retired from his bed-side and taken my seat by the window, as I thought that would be a more delicate mode, than to stand by him, at least for a few minutes. He became more composed, and entirely still. After he had uncovered his face and listened for a few minutes, I rose to approach him. His mother, anticipating my design, and as I thought sensible of his reluctance to speak to me, rose and approached him before me. Calling him gently by name, she told him, that I had come to see him, and inquired if he “would not like to have me pray with him.” Instantly, stretching both his hands towards the heavens, he raised himself on his bed, and holding his hands still aloft, as far as he could reach, he uttered the single syllable, “oh!” with a dreadfulness of accent and a prolongation of the sound, which made my blood curdle in my veins. His wife and mother turned pale—the former sinking into a chair from which she had just risen. This sudden and singular action of the sick man led me to believe he was in an agony of mind. It did not seem like the action of bodily distress. It was all together different. Thinking it the best way to induce him to express his feelings to me, I inquired:—

“Has your pain returned?”

Still holding his hands aloft, and without looking at me, he exclaimed in a tone of horror, “oh! oh! oh!”

“Are you in great pain?” I asked.

Another groan was his only answer.

“I am sorry to find you so ill,” said I.

He uttered another groan—a dreadful shriek!

His wife sobbing aloud left the room. I then said to him, “God is merciful. He is the hearer of prayer; and if you are”—

“Oh!” was the dreadful sound from his quivering lips which interrupted me; it was a shriek, which rang through the house; and everyone of the family hurried into the room where he was. Among others was his little brother, who was the only one he seemed to notice. He glanced, once or twice, at him, and thinking he was about to speak to him, I remained silent. As he sat thus erect in his bed, with his hands stretched aloft to the utmost of his power, his eyes fixed on vacancy before him, and his lips uttering only his dreadful monosyllable, as a scream apparently of horror, he was the most pitiful object my eyes ever beheld.

“Shall I pray with you?” said I.

He flung himself back violently upon his bed, turned his face away from me towards the wall, and again drew the clothes over his head. We knelt by his bed-side, and continued some time in prayer. He had not spoken to me at all. But it appeared to me, that his agony was quite as much mental as bodily; and I aimed to pray in such a manner, that he

might be soothed and encouraged by the idea of the mercy of God towards sinners, through our Lord Jesus Christ. During prayer he remained entirely still; but I could distinctly hear his deep breathing, and feel the bed shake, as a long breath rushed from his lungs. I continued in prayer for some six or eight minutes, I suppose, longer than I should have done, had not this exercise appeared to quiet him, and had it not been the only mode, by which I appeared to be able to make any religious idea find access to his mind.

When we rose from our knees, his face was uncovered; and turning his eyes upon me, then upon his mother, then back upon me again, he seemed to be on the point of speaking to me, and I stood by him in silence. With a look and tone of decision, he exclaimed—as he fixed his eye firmly upon me:

“It will do no good to pray for me, sir.”

I waited for him to say more, but as he did not appear to be inclined to do so, I replied:—

“God is the hearer of prayer: he has encouraged us to pray to him: he has not said, that it will do no good to pray.”

“My day has gone by!” said he. “It is too late for me!—it is too late!”

“No, sir; it is not too late. If you want God’s mercy, you may have it. God himself says so: ‘Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.’ You ought to think of the death of Christ for sinners,—of the mercy of God.”

“Mercy! mercy!” he vociferated; “that is what makes my situation so dreadful! I have despised mercy! I have scoffed at God! I have refused Christ! If God was only just, I could bear it. But now the thought of his

abused mercy is worst of all! There is no mercy for me any longer! for years I have refused Christ! My day has gone by! I am lost! I am lost!”

“You think wrong,” said I, “God has not limited his invitations. Christ says, ‘Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.’”

“My day has gone by!” said he.

“No; it has not,” I replied, in a voice as firm as his own: “behold now is the accepted time—now is the day of salvation.”

“That is not for me!” said he: “I have had my time and lost it! I have spent all my life for nothing! I have been a fool all my days, and now I am dying! I have sought for nothing but this world! I have refused to attend to God, and now he has taken hold of me, and I cannot escape!” (The family, much affected, retired from the room.)

“You have time still to seek him, to repent and flee to Christ. You have time now—to-day. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin. Pray to God. You may be saved.”

“You think so,” said he; “but I know better—I know better! It is too late! I am dying, sir!”

“Christ accepted the dying thief,” said I. “God is so rich in mercy, that he pardons sinners at the eleventh hour.”

“The eleventh hour is past!” said he. “This is the twelfth hour! God’s time of vengeance has come! I have had my time, and lost it! It is all gone! I have loved the world only, and now I must leave it! Oh! fool! fool! What is the world to me! Oh! how could I live so! I have been a fool all my days!”

He uttered these desponding expressions in the most firm and decisive tone. And as I was aiming to convince him of the mercy of God, and referring to the scriptures, all I could say did not seem to weigh a feather with him.

His wife and his mother hearing our conversation, had returned to the room, and seated themselves, in silence, at a distance from his bed. And just as he was uttering some exclamations about his love of the world, and his folly, his father entered the room, and hearing his expressions for a little while, he approached the bed, saying to him:—

“Why, you need not feel so bad: you have never done any hurt to anybody.”

“Don’t talk to me, father,” said he, in a tone of authority, or rather of hatred and anger. “You have been my worst enemy! You have ruined me! You led me to disobey God, and neglect the Bible! You led me into sin when I was only a little boy! You took me off to fish and hunt, Sundays, and stroll around the fields, when mother wanted me to go to church. You told me there was no hell, that all men would be saved. And don’t come here now to try to deceive me any longer! You have done your work! You have been my ruin!—Oh! if, I had minded mother, and not you, I should not have come to such an end!—Don’t cry, mother, don’t cry so,”—(he heard her sobbing.) “You are a good woman: you have nothing to be afraid of. God will take care of you. Don’t cry so. Oh! I would give a thousand worlds, if I owned them, to have your religion—or any part of it—or anything like it! But I am lost! I am lost!—You told me, father, there was no hell, and I tried to believe it. I joined you in wickedness, when I knew better. I have laughed at hell; and now hell laughs at me! God will punish sinners! He has taken bold of me, and I cannot get out of his hands!”

His father attempted to say something to him; but the son would not allow him to finish a single sentence. The moment he began to speak, the son exclaimed:—

“Quit, father! Don’t talk to me! Your lies cannot deceive me any longer! You have ruined my soul!—Where is my brother?”

As he made this inquiry, his wife rose, and coming near to the bedside, replied:—

“He is out in the garden, I believe. What do you want of him? shall I call him?”

“Yes; call him. He is young. I want to tell him not to believe what father says to him—not to be influenced by him. He will lead him to hell. Now, when he is young, I want him to know what Universalists say is false. I don’t want him to be led into sin, as father led me. I want him to believe what mother says to him; and read the Bible; and pray, before praying is too late; and not break the Sabbath day; and attend church; so that he may not die as I am dying.”

His father, looking at me, remarked:—

“He has had so much fever and pain, that his mind is not regular.”

“Father! I am no more crazy than you are! You need not deceive yourself with that notion! But you are not deceived. You know better! You try to deceive yourself, just as you try to believe there is no hell. You pretend, that all men will be saved; but you don’t believe it. You led me to talk in the same way, and laugh at the warnings in the Bible against sinners. When I was a little boy, you began to lead me into sin! Don’t come here to torment me with your falsehoods now, when I am dying!”

At this moment, his little brother, about twelve years of age, whom he had asked for, entered the room. Calling him by name, and looking tenderly upon him, vastly different from the look he had just bent upon his father, he said:—

“Come here, my brother. I am going to die, very soon; and I want to tell you something. I want you should remember it after I am dead. You are young now, and I want you to begin to live “in the right way. I have been a very wicked man. Don’t do as I have done. Read the Bible. Never swear, or take God’s name in vain Always go to church, Sundays. Always mind what mother says to you. Father will lead you into a very bad way, if you are not very careful. He led me into sin, when I was a little boy, like you. He has led me to ruin, because I was fool enough to yield to him. If I had done as mother wanted me to, I might have died in peace. She is a good woman.—Don’t cry, mother, do not cry so:” (sobbing aloud she left the room:)—“If father ever says there is no hell for the wicked, don’t believe him. There is an awful hell! Remember that I told you so, when I was dying! If father ever says, that all men will be saved, never believe a word of it. The wicked will be turned into hell! Dear boy! It is a pity that he should be led to ruin. Never believe what the Universalists say. Believe your mother; and don’t let father lead you into sin. Be a good boy. If I could live, I would tell you more another time. But I must die!”

The young brother had stood by him weeping, manifestly struggling hard to control his emotions, till entirely overcome he cried aloud in a burst of grief, and rushed out of the room.

While he was talking to his little brother, the father listened for a time, apparently unmoved, and then with a sort of stealthy tread went out.

It was one of the most affecting scenes. His mother, who had returned again to the room, his wife and myself, subdued to tears, sat for

some time in silence. It was enough to melt a heart of rock. But the sick man never shed a tear. I had hoped, when he spake so tenderly to his mother, and when he began to talk so affectingly to his little brother, that his own sensibilities would have been excited in a tender manner, and be a means of overcoming the stern and dreadful stubbornness of his resolute despair. But there was none of this. His voice never faltered. His eye never moistened. His burning brow never quivered. I again attempted to converse with him; but he manifested no disposition to hear me. He did not even reply to any question. Recollecting how he had appeared a little while before, when, I prayed by his side, I proposed to him, that I would make a short prayer with him, before I left him.

“Not here!” said he, firmly. “Pray in the other room, if you wish to pray. Do not pray here. I cannot pray. And I will not pretend it. I am beyond praying. My day is gone by! The harvest is past! Mother, I wish you would go into the other room, if you want to pray.”

We retired to another room, where we found his father, who had probably heard all that he had said. The old man appeared to be unaffected, and when I spake to him about the necessity of preparation for death, he seemed as indifferent as a stone. As the rest of us kneeled in prayer, he sat looking out of the window.

Before I left the house, I returned again to the room of the sick man. He appeared very uneasy and restless, but I did not think his pain was bodily. The doctor came in, felt his pulse, asked some questions, prescribed for him; and saying he thought he would “be better to-morrow,” left him.

“I shall be dead, to-morrow,” said he, firmly, without changing his position, or appearing to regard the presence of anyone.

Briefly assuring him again of the mercy of God, the readiness of Christ to save him, and exhorting him to prayer, I bade him good-bye, (to which he made no answer,) and left him.

After I was gone, (as I afterwards learnt,) he remained very much silent, seldom even replying to any question, but, from time to time, tossing from side to side, and groaning aloud. His father brought him a paper, (as I was told,) which he wished him to sign as his will. He refused to sign it. Again the father brought it. It was read to him. Witnesses were called. He refused to sign it. "Father," said he, fiercely, "you have led me into sin, into the snares of the devil; you have ruined me forever! And now you want me to sign that paper, to take away from my wife and child all their support! You know it would not be right for me to sign it. Take it away!"

Repeatedly during the night, his father urged him to sign that will. He steadily refused to do so, and sometimes stated the reasons for his refusal. But at last, the son signed it, wearied out with the ceaseless importunity, or what is more probable, in a moment of insanity, unconscious of what he was doing. Be this as it may, the will was set aside afterwards by the court.

Early the next morning I returned to see him. The doctor had just left him, still giving his friends encouragement that he would recover, though he said he had "not expected to find him so bad as he was, but his symptoms were not unfavorable." I suppose he formed his opinion without regard to the state of the sick man's mind; and on this ground I have not a doubt his opinion was right.

As I entered the room, I was struck with his altered appearance. He looked ten years older than when I left him, the previous afternoon. He was evidently fast approaching his end. His voice was sunken and husky—his breathing short and labored—his strength diminished—his look wild

and delirious. He talked incoherently, his words running upon all strange matters by turns, as I understood had been the case with him at times, through the whole night.

He had manifestly some lucid intervals. In one of them I attempted to converse with him, but he did not appear to regard me at all. I offered to pray with him, and he answered:—

“Prayer comes too late now—the harvest is past!” He immediately turned himself on the bed with a distressing shriek, and lay with his face towards the wall; and a moment afterwards his lips were vocal with delirious ravings! I may not here record what he said in his delirium; but it may be remarked, that his thoughts seemed to run much upon his father, in an unhappy manner.

I stayed in his room for a long time. When he seemed to have a lucid interval, I conversed with his mother and wife, hoping that he might attend to what was said, as he had apparently done the day before; but he did not seem to notice it.

I particularly noticed his manner towards those who were around him, as I had done the day before. When his mind was not wandering, he appeared the same as on the previous day. He would not speak to his father, but with great reluctance, and as if he detested him. He appeared unwilling to have him in his presence. He would follow him with his eye, as he came into, the room or retired from it, with a look of hatred. Towards his mother, his manner was entirely different. He spoke to her affectionately: He would gaze upon her for minutes together, with a look of tenderness and intense interest. If he saw her in tears, he would sometimes strive to comfort her. He was manifestly affectionate towards his wife and his little brother. His eyes would rest upon them with a look of fondness, but fix upon his father with the look of a fiend.

After I had retired from his room for a few minutes, we returned again, and I found him sinking so fast, that I thought it my duty to tell his mother and his wife, that I did not believe he would live out the day. They seemed surprised, and immediately sent for the doctor. When he came he found him dead! He had survived about three hours after I left him, growing weaker and weaker till he breathed his last, with the words of delirium upon his lips.

“When the harvest is past, and the summer is gone,
And sermons and prayers shall be o’er;
When the beams cease to break, of the sweet Sabbath morn,
And Jesus invites thee no more;
When the rich gales of mercy no longer shall blow,
The gospel no message declare;—
Sinner, how canst thou bear the deep wailings of wo!
How suffer the night of despair!

When the holy have gone to the regions of peace,
To dwell in the mansions above;
When their harmony wakes, in the fulness of bliss,
Their song to the Saviour they love;—
Say, O sinner, that livest at rest and secure,
Who fearest no trouble to come,
Can thy spirit the swellings of sorrow endure;
Or bear the impenitent’s doom!
Or bear the impenitent’s doom!”

It does not belong to us to decide upon the condition of this departed man;—but who would wish to die like him? “Let me die the death of the righteous; let my last end be like his.”

I have no reason to suppose, that the religious character of that father was ever essentially altered. At the funeral of his son he appeared very much affected, and I hoped that his affliction and the serious exercises of that solemn and tender occasion would have an abiding and salutary impression upon his mind. But when I visited him the next day, I found him occupied with the papers of his son, and the will which he had induced him to sign on the night before his death; and though his wife expostulated with him against such an employment at such a time, he still kept on. And afterwards till the day of his death, I never found any reason to believe that he ever became a different man.

But it was not so with that little brother, to whom the dying man gave such a solemn and affecting caution. The boy seemed to have treasured every word of it in his heart. He was very respectful and obedient to his father, in all things but one. In all that pertained to religion he was as fixed as a rock, against his father's influence. He would instantly leave him, if his father uttered a word on that subject. He would not be induced to neglect church or violate the Sabbath, by any influence or authority of his father. Without explanation or words of any sort, he would quietly disobey him, when he thought his requirements were contrary to the law of God; while in all other things he was most respectful and obedient towards him. I knew him well for years. His Bible and his mother were his counsellors; the Sabbath was his delight. He sought the Lord, and found him. And when giving me an account of the manner in which his mind had been influenced in respect to his salvation, he referred to what his dying brother had said to him. But he made this reference with evident reluctance and pain, weeping in bitterness of spirit. I have every reason to believe, that both he and the widow of his departed brother are the children of God, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.