

Mary Anne St. John
THE

SCHOOL GIRL.

BY MRS. SHERWOOD.

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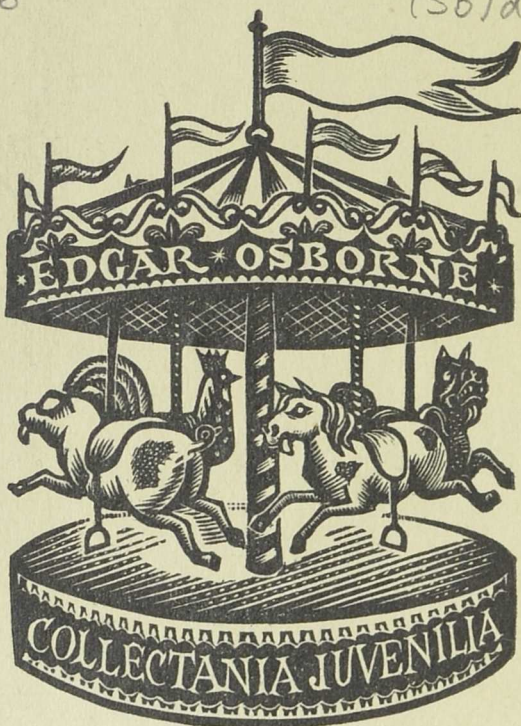
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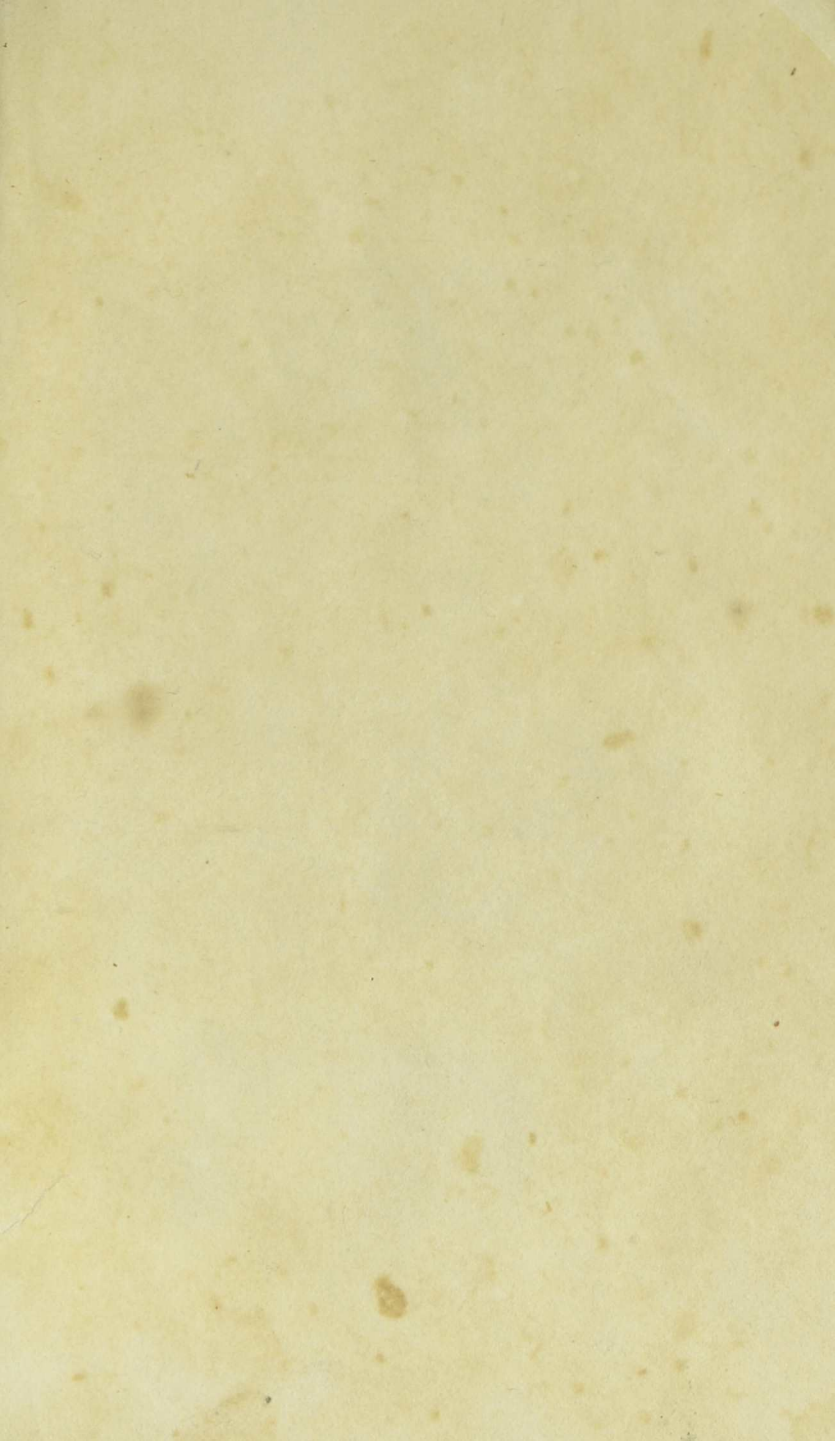
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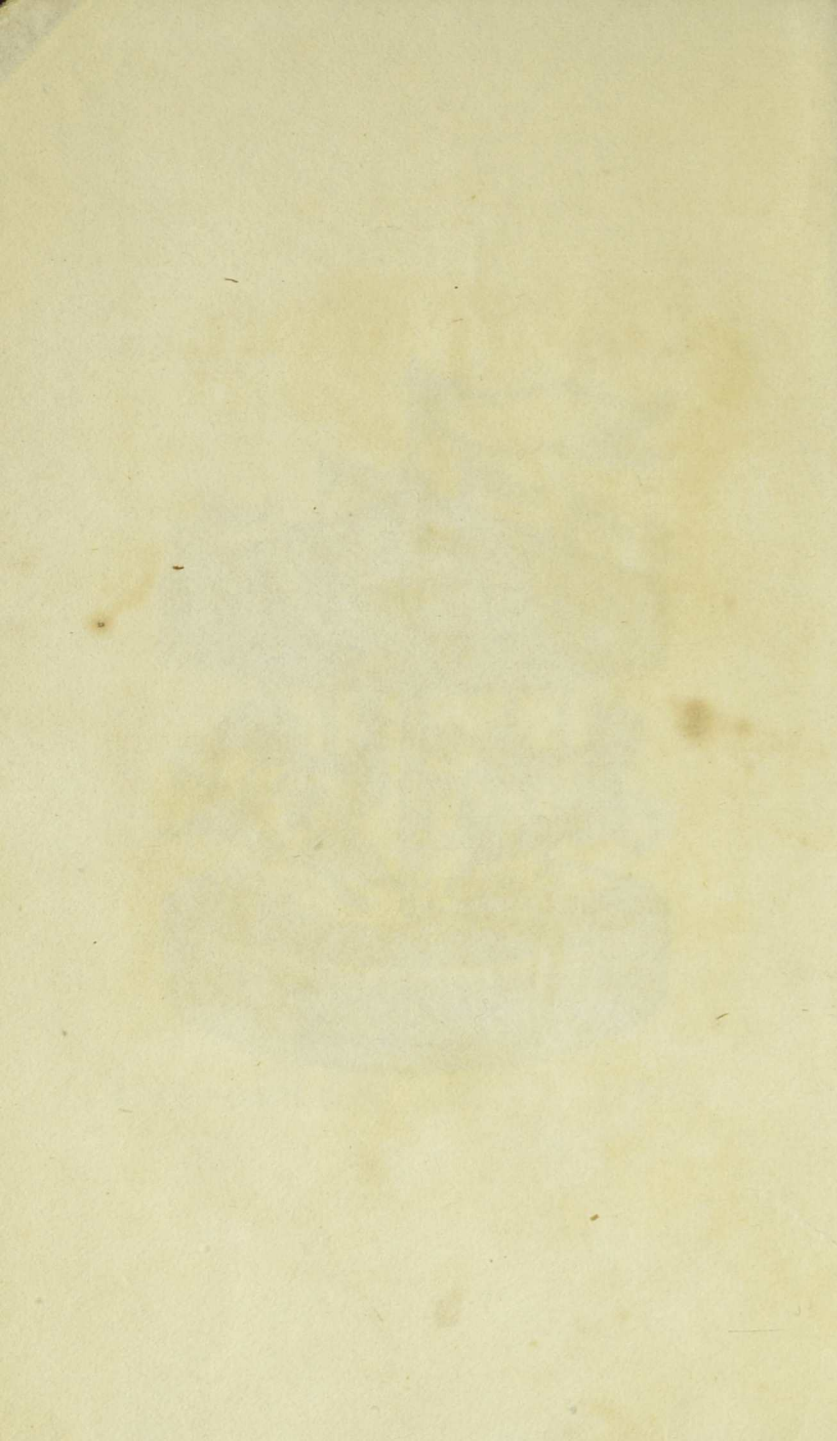
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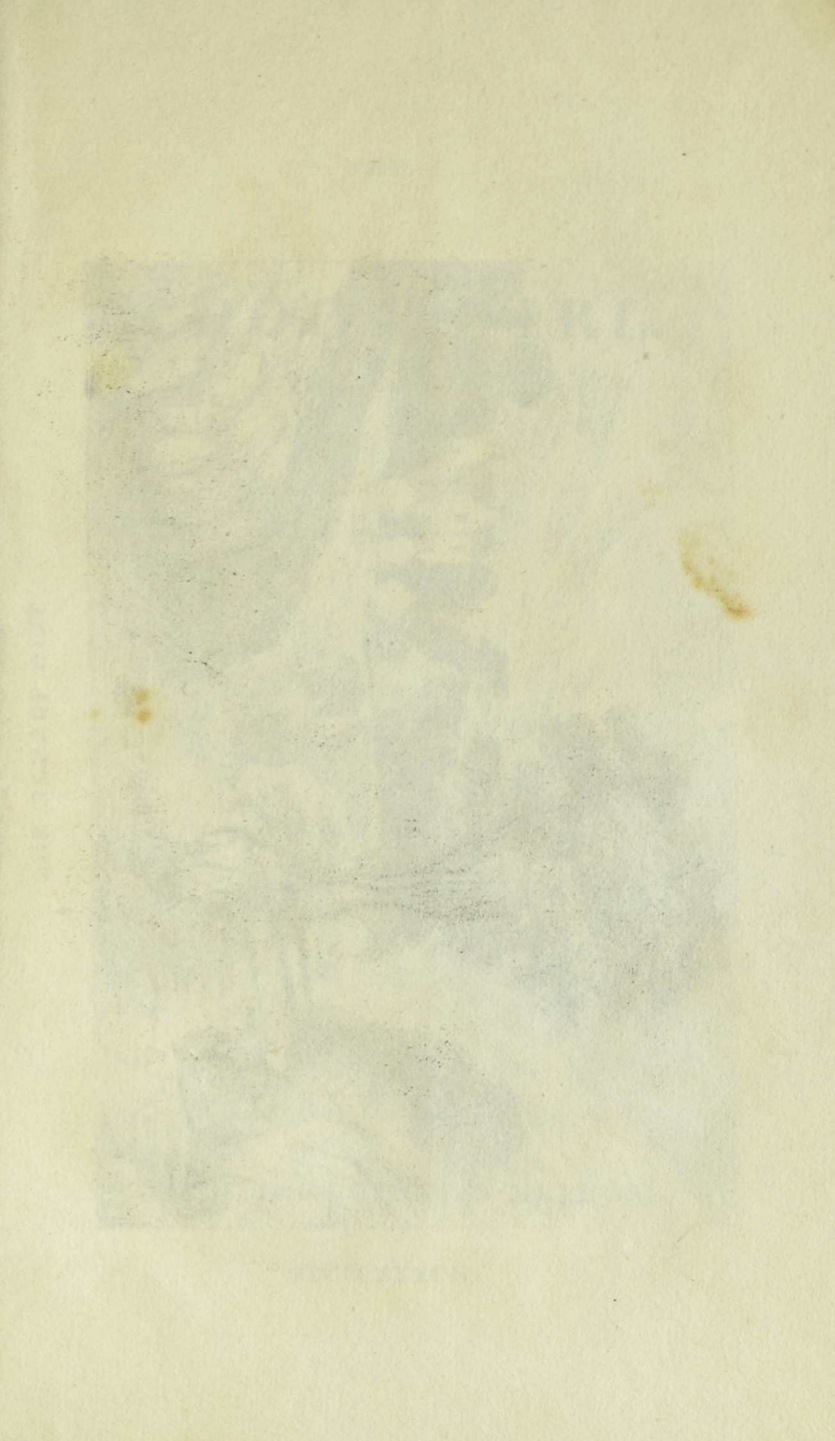


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THE SCHOOL GIRL,

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THE

SCHOOL GIRL.

ENTERED AT STATIONERS' HALL.

BY THE AUTHOR

PUBLISHED BY THOMAS NELSON

MILFORD

THE
SCHOOL GIRL.

THERE is a certain period in most people's lives, in which the individual is blessed, or the contrary, perhaps I should say, (if I could find a word exactly equivalent to my meaning) with a most complacent spirit of self satisfaction. This crisis generally occurs with females at the time, be it sooner or later in life, when they are leaving school; and the affection is more or less powerful in lively and healthy subjects, according to the length of time which the patient may have spent under the trammels of school discipline, according to the sort of seminary in which she has resided, the sort of instructions which have there been given, the number and celebrity of the

masters, especially of the dancing masters, and the tastes of the heads of the school, as they regard dress and external embellishments. It is a crisis which generally falls in with bloom, and bright and deceitful illusions, and profound ignorance of all useful things, and is always accompanied with a total unconsciousness of its presence.

I do not presume to say at what period this mental malady attacks the nobler sex with most force, though I am apt to think that it occurs not so early with young men as with girls.

But now, lest some of my young and gentle readers might be disgusted were I to proceed to any great length with sentiments instead of narrative, (which last is ever dear to young minds,) I shall forthwith introduce myself, beginning with some little account of my pedigree:—My father is

an officer in the king's service, and having been a widower for many years, he placed me in a school in a large town in the north, with a lady for whom he had great respect. It was settled that I was to remain at school till I had entered my 17th year, at which period I was to be supposed to be finished: after which I was to be received into the family of my father's only sister, who had been many years the wife of a surgeon of some eminence in a country town in one of the midland counties. It does not suit me to give the real name of my aunt, nor of the town in which she resides; I shall therefore select the name of Darkman for her, and that of Ledbury for the town in which I now reside with her. I mean no offence against the really lovely place which actually bears that name, though it may be hoped it does not deserve it,

but that the spirit of its inhabitants are contrasted with the heavy appellation of the place of their abode.

But as I was saying, it was settled that I was to be finished when I entered my 17th year, after which I was to be removed to my aunt's; it happened that this period fell in with the commencement of the midsummer holidays; could it then be wondered at, if, in the anticipation of a complete emancipation from repetitions, dumb bells, backboards, stocks, bracers, Mangnall's questions, Murray's grammar, and French exercises, I thought myself supremely happy, especially as I had no particular regard for any of my companions at school; and then, when to the expectation of these manifold deliverances, I had the hope of being introduced at once into all the delights of the society in which my aunt, who occupied

the best house in the market place of Ledbury, was entitled to introduce me, what more could I have desired. I had not a regret to bestow on the place of my education. And now let me describe myself such as I then was—a very few years since, for I am still very young—and let my reader understand, that if there is any difference in me now it is simply this, that I have, I trust, been made to know myself better than I then did, though as yet the light which has been given me, is but an imperfect glimmering in comparison of what it may be even yet in this life, though as much perhaps as my mind would bear at present.

I was at sixteen a tall healthy girl, high spirited, somewhat pert, fond of dress, though I had a very false taste, and, as my governess affirmed and wrote to my father, (who had been abroad many years) the most accom-

plished young lady whom she ever had had the honour to dismiss from her establishment. This word accomplished, which is so often applied to young creatures, such as myself, certainly can not be properly understood, or no teacher could possibly be so arrogant as to apply it to any pupil; accomplished, what does it mean? from whence is it derived? can any created being be accomplished, taking the word in its fullest sense? but taking it comparatively only, and of a school girl particularly, what are these accomplishments of which the teacher often boasts, but the mere and often incorrect rudiments of certain branches of the fine arts—rudiments often too imperfect ever to shoot into green and vigorous life? As to me, my accomplishments are soon enumerated. I could read English, and give Walker's pronounci-

ation of hard words, and I could read French, and translate with the help of a dictionary, and I knew many phrases from the French dialogue book, and I could repeat French verbs, and had written ten copy books of French exercises, perhaps more, and had corrected them myself with the key, and had gone into the very bottom of the labyrinth of Murray's English grammar, and I could answer every question in Pinnock's history of England, and was a first rate dancer, and could copy eyes and ears and noses in chalk, and could run up and down the scales on the pianoforte better than any girl in the house, and could tatt and make bead purses and gum paper, and explain conundrums ; moreover, I could write a note, or even a letter to my papa, without spoiling more than two sheets of paper in the attempt ; how then could

my accomplishments have been disputed? nor do I remember that they ever were so, at least, in my presence, whatever malice or envy might have suggested behind my back; for merit will create envy, and envy always gives birth to detraction.

But the breaking-up day being arrived, and all parting scenes being over, I at length found myself in the stage coach, having two days journey before me; but as I was to be met by a servant of my uncle's at the place where I was to sleep, I got on without any very perilous adventures, and found myself perfectly safe at my aunt Darkman's door in the market place of Ledbury, about ten o'clock at night, on the second day after I had left school.

I was received with as much cordiality by my aunt as was in her nature to feel or to exhibit for any

one ; but my uncle, though somewhat rough in his manners, and only my kinsman by marriage, manifested more warmth than my aunt had done ; however, I soon perceived that there was no comfort within the reach of a moderate fortune, I might add, no luxury, which was not to be found under this roof, for every dish was concocted and cooked to a nicety, every piece of furniture was as convenient and neat as hands could make it, and every habit of the family was so arranged as to promote the utmost present ease, no person in the house but my uncle and the boy being subjected to any sort of inconvenience.

My aunt had brought her husband all the money with which he had begun the world ; this money had turned to such good account, through his industry, that he was, at the time I became an inmate of his family,

known to be a rich man ; and as he was very indulgent to his wife, and as she had never had any children, she had found nothing to do but to administer to her own wants, which wants had naturally become more exacting from day to day, so much so, in short, as to absorb entirely all her feelings and desires, and entirely to shut her up in self, so that no person who did not administer in some degree to her comforts, had the slightest chance of obtaining the smallest particle of her regards. But she had considered that I might be a comfort and assistance to her, and had felt that it would be a little plume in her cap, to have an accomplished niece with her, whose father was a major in his Majesty's service. Now, little as I knew myself at that time, I was exceedingly quick in discerning the foibles of another, and actually saw

into many of my aunt's feelings towards me. The very next morning after I arrived, as we sate at the breakfast table, my uncle being gone out, my aunt then, after having used some complimentary expressions as a kind of preface, and as it were to put me in good humour, at length added, "of course, dear Belinda, to you who have received the best of educations, it will be no trouble to write my notes, and to answer the few letters I receive ; and when I am poorly, you can return my morning visits, and, I dare say, you would like to make me a new pair of card racks. I don't doubt but you have some card board and gold paper amongst your things, and perhaps you may have some little notion of millinery ; have you any idea of pinning up a turban ? I always wear turbans in an afternoon, and some times in a morning when

I have any a little soiled or tarnished, and not fit for parties. It is very expensive putting them out, and I have several by me that want making up." Now I knew well that my aunt had not refused to accept a considerable stipend from my father for my board; therefore as I was to the full as selfish as herself, I was resolved at once to be even with her, (diamond cut diamond, thought I, comparing myself and my aunt, to what we had no manner of pretensions, viz. precious stones,) and accordingly I denied the fact of the card board and gold paper, though there was abundance of each at the bottom of my trunks, and declared that I had so little turn for millinery, that if I touched one of her turbans I should infallibly convert it into an old man's night cap. The notes, however, and the visitings, I willingly undertook, with

this mental reservation, that when I knew the good people of Ledbury, I would just visit those I liked and leave the others unvisited. I know not what my aunt thought of me, but I thought for myself that I would just begin as I meant to go on. However, after this little trial of strength, we rubbed on tolerably well ; I was trying a new manner of life, and expecting much happiness, and therefore I was tolerably good humoured, and we spent the ten or more following days, including a rainy Sunday, which, by the by, was insufferably dull, in so regular a manner, that if I describe one day it will serve as a sample for all the rest. We rose late, and lingered over our breakfast till about ten ; my aunt then dawdled about her kitchen for an incredible length of time, considering that she never did any thing in her

family whatever; whilst I sate in the front parlour on a window seat, with a novel in my hand, which I changed from time to time at a very ordinary library in the street. When my aunt had performed her domestic duties, as she called them, she always sent for me, and we dressed for public exhibition, and either sate to receive visits, or went out to pay them; for we had much of this work to do, as every acquaintance of my aunt in the town called to pay her compliments to me: at three we dined, and whilst my aunt dozed in her arm chair after the repast, I invariably went up to my own room, where Cicely, my aunt's confidential servant, generally visited me with her needle work in her hand, in order to instruct me in the histories of the town's people. At five o'clock it was time to begin to dress again, either to receive company, or

to go out, and the evenings were always finished with cards and a supper.

All this was well enough, till it had been tried sufficiently long to cause ennui; for nothing could possibly be more vapid and empty to a young mind than this mode of life. To my aunt it had become habitual, and though its effect on her mind was that of utter dissatisfaction, yet habit produces a sort of second nature which man has not power in himself to overcome.

But my reader will perhaps enquire, does not this Belinda know that she has a soul, and that she must die, and leave this world at some time or another, for all men die in Adam? how then is it, that she has gone on so long with her story, without the smallest reference to religion? Has she no religion of any kind? Has she never attended a place of worship? Has she never read the Bible?

To this enquiry I reply, that I had gone to church every Sunday when there was neither rain nor snow, ever since I could recollect—that I had always had a Bible in my box—that I had learnt my catechism, and that I had said certain prayers duly most nights, kneeling at the foot of my bed—and that I had even formed some sort of theory in my own mind about religion, some bald and confused theory, the principal heads of which were, that the soul is immortal, that man must die, that Christ had come to die for good people, that such would be happy in the world to come, and that there was an eternal fire for the wicked; but who those were who were to be accounted good and worthy of the happiness of heaven, was a matter wholly undefined in my mind; though I had a general idea that the wicked were more numerous than

the good ; but it is next to impossible to state undefined ideas.

I, however, perceived but little difference in my aunt's opinions respecting religion from those of the persons who had hitherto educated me, excepting that the latter had no objection to reading the newspaper on a Sunday, whereas my principal governess did not approve of it ; and that whereas all fast days appointed by our church were duly kept at our school room table, my aunt held it as a principle that fasts were only appointed by the church for sinners, or such as lived too freely at other times ; nevertheless, as she told me, she never allowed of any other hot dish besides fish either on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday, from which it will appear that I was not likely to gain much more light from my aunt than I had done from my in-

structress at school; and as since my short residence at Ledbury, I had not conversed with a single person who did not appear to be as entirely dull and dead as myself, it can not be accounted for, according to the usual mode of man's reasoning, wherefore, in this dullest of dull places, it should have pleased God to have visited my soul, and to have inspired me with that firstsmall spark of life and feeling which is as a fire unquenchable, and which will continue to burn and glow until all that is of dross in me (and that is all which I can properly call my own nature) shall be destroyed, and I shall be rendered pure as the fine gold of the sanctuary. I speak with an assurance which may be misunderstood; but as my confidence is in my God, I shall not be confounded, for faithful is he that called me.

The occasion of my first feeling any serious impression was on the second Saturday morning of my being at Ledbury. I was in my usual post in the parlour window, when a very magnificent funeral passed down the street, with a hearse and nodding plumes, and all the usual paraphernalia of such gloomy pageants. The progress of the procession was slow, and as the window was open, I heard the rumbling of the wheels, and the tread of the horses long after it had passed out of sight; and still when these rumblings were no more heard, I was led on through the train of reflection which these sights and sounds had seemed to inspire, and suddenly and unaccountably (for this was not the first by many times that I had seen a pompous funeral) I was led to make really serious and deep reflections on the folly of immortal

creatures, in their being wholly absorbed in present things to the utter neglect of the concerns of the soul. And next these questions occurred—What did Christ come for? Who is he? Why did he die? Was it necessary for the Son of a God to die? Did he die to save good people, or did he come to save sinners? Who are sinners? To not one of these questions could my mind, or my previous knowledge of religion, suggest any satisfactory answer; but I was so thoughtful all day, that my aunt observed it, and asked me more than once what was the matter with me?

The next day being Sunday, was remarkably fine, and my aunt said at breakfast to her husband, “I have a great inclination to dine early, and walk after dinner to see aunt Paterson.”

“Who may she be?” I asked.

“Why, bless me, child,” she replied, “did you never hear of an aunt of mine and of your father’s, who married somewhat in humble life, and is now a widow, and has been such many years? she is living in a cottage not two miles from hence; but I forget that you have been brought up entirely among strangers to the family, and scarcely know the surname of your mother’s parents; and this comes,” she added, “of your father’s whim of putting you to school in so remote a place.”

I confessed that I had never heard of this great aunt, but I liked the thought of the excursion; and accordingly after dinner set out with Mrs. Darkman to visit the old lady, much more gladly than if it had been a place of worship to which we were bound. On the way we met a Miss Chapman, an elderly single person, a

friend of my aunt's, and she being persuaded to join our party, I was in consequence left more to the indulgence of my own thoughts, which gradually, as we proceeded, began to take the turn they had done the day before.

We were a long time on the road, for it was hot; but at length having crossed a high corn field, and reached a ridge of land at the top of it, we suddenly came in view of a little narrow green valley, through which ran a pure stream of water, each side of the valley forming a sheep walk, which was scattered over with flocks; at the very bottom of the dell was a large timber-built farm house, looking clean and hospitable, and just without the precincts of the farmer's garden, a very neat thatched cottage, having apparently two rooms below and two above. This cottage presented its gable to the front, having a pretty

porch shaded with honey suckle, and a small garden behind. My aunt pointed out this last small dwelling to me, as the abode of Mrs. Paterson and her maid, adding, that the old lady had been a very unfortunate person, being reduced in her old age to a small annuity, having first lost an affectionate husband, and afterwards two fair daughters in their early bloom.

“Poor soul,” exclaimed Miss Chapman, “how she is to be pitied; it is quite a charity to visit her now and then. Lord, help her! what comfort can she have in yon dull place?”

“Why,” replied my aunt, “as to that, I suppose she likes it; and the people at the farm are very good to her; and between friends,” she added in a low tone, “she is not fit for the world, having some strange notions.” More was whispered, which I did not hear; though I certainly gave my

full attention to catch the whisper. Now I could have an especial delight in describing every particular about this cottage, to which we immediately descended. It was situated in a region of fragrant odours, fresh breezes, bees, and running waters. It was a scene which immediately struck the beholder with its peculiarly picturesque beauty, and its character of peace ; and yet how little did I then understand the nature of that peace which rested on the lowly tenement on which I then, for the first time, looked down.

We found Mrs. Paterson sitting in a sort of best kitchen, with a little round table before her, which had a flourished mahogany border, shewing that it had been a tea-tray in times of yore. On this table lay a large open Bible—the maid was setting out the tea at another table ; nothing could

be more neat than was the old lady, or more clean than her house and her attendant. She received us kindly and politely, and when told who I was, she kissed and blessed me.

Little interesting conversation passed whilst we were at tea; but after this regale, my aunt and Miss Chapman proposed a walk to call on the farmer's wife, whilst I was to remain with my great aunt.

My first question on being left alone with her was this, "do you not find this place dull, madam, in winter?"

"Dear child," she answered, "no, I do not; because I am never alone."

"You have your maid," I remarked.

"And a kind and a pious one," she replied, "and one who has done with the world, though fifteen years younger than I am. But I have another friend who, though dwelling on high in divine majesty, is ever with me."

I understood her, and said, “ you have long, no doubt, had great delight in serving God.”

“ In serving God, my love,” she replied, “ what can I do to serve God ?” but he has long made it manifest to my apprehension that he is serving me and mine, and that is better. He served me, my dear niece, when he sent his Son in human flesh to die for sinners, thereby satisfying his perfect justice, and affording free scope and exercise for that mercy which endureth for ever, and which shall triumph when death and the grave are swallowed up in victory—complete and perfect victory ; he served me, when he made himself manifest to the soul of my husband, and removed him from this present evil world, to a state of perfect happiness in an eternal union with himself ; he served me, when he took my two fair daugh-

ters from this land of sin and sorrow,
to that bright world of joy

Where not a wave of trouble rolls
Across their peaceful breasts.—

All these things has he done to serve me, and now he adds this service also, that he has given me the assurance of the present happiness of my beloved ones, and of the future joys into which I shall enter at the period in which this frail body shall sink into the grave; and he has added more and still more; he has opened to me such large and vast and beautiful views of redeeming love, as they regard the human race, as fill me at times with joy unspeakable, and I long for the moment when I may fly from the body, and join in singing the hallelujahs above. Oh! niece Belinda, if you knew what God has done for me, you would not think that I could be dull;” and then she

added, “ who could enumerate all the little comforts which I have about me here ? my garden, my cottage, so cool in summer, so warm in winter ; my flowers, the pleasant prospects, my books, my kind neighbours, and my faithful servant ; to which I must add this crown of my rejoicing, though I have mentioned it before, the entire deliverance from all care as it regards the state of those who are gone before me ; truly the cradle of my age is gently rocked, and my condition most blessed.”

Simple, and plain, and straight forward as all this might appear to a well instructed believer, to me it was totally inexplicable. I heard the words of the old lady, but I did not comprehend them, and yet there was a feeling given to me, I say given to me, which led me to wish to hear more ; but my aunt Darkman and Miss Chapman

returning, the conversation was suddenly broken off, and that without ceremony, for Mrs. Darkman, seeing me look serious, she waved her hand, and said with a laugh, "So you have been hearing a sermon, Belinda; and now suppose the preacher gives us the blessing, and we will be off; for the evening is closing in. Don't ask me to stay, Mrs. Paterson, for you know I have told you that once for all, I will hear none of your notions; my mind is made up upon religion, and I am not going to have it disturbed again: so good night, dear aunt; but though I will take nothing from you, I must not forget to tell you, that I shall send the boy over to-morrow with a little cream cheese of Cicely's making from my own dairy."

Mrs. Paterson thanked her, though, as I saw, with a tear in her eye; and I whispered as the ladies stepped out

at the door, "I shall bring the cheese myself, and hear more."

The old lady kissed me, and thus we parted. I did as I had planned; I engaged a little girl in the neighbourhood to walk with me, and I came again the next day, and again a few days afterwards; and thus listened from day to day to the old lady, until an entire change was wrought in my mind, I certainly can not say by her discourse only, but by the remarkable falling in of this means of instruction with the awakening which had preceded it; an awakening which was contemporaneous, as far as I have since thought, with the sight of the funeral procession. The new life therefore was not given me by Mrs. Paterson's conversation, neither by the gloomy pageant; for I had seen funerals before; nay, I had seen a corpse, a far more striking spectacle than any arti-

ficial parade, and the corpse of a play mate, a companion, and one I had loved ; and had derived neither light nor life from the sights ; and I might perhaps, for aught I could tell, have heard some really spiritual sermons ; but no human ministry, no pains, nor fears, nor appalling spectacles, can awake the dead soul ; neither can the voice of the teacher, however lively and spiritual he may be ; but when the life has been imparted, then may all these things profit ; and most blessed was I in my new born state, to have such a nurse provided, as it were immediately, in my excellent great aunt. And with what delight did she feed me with the milk of the gospel, which she administered in its purest form, without admixture of men's ideas.

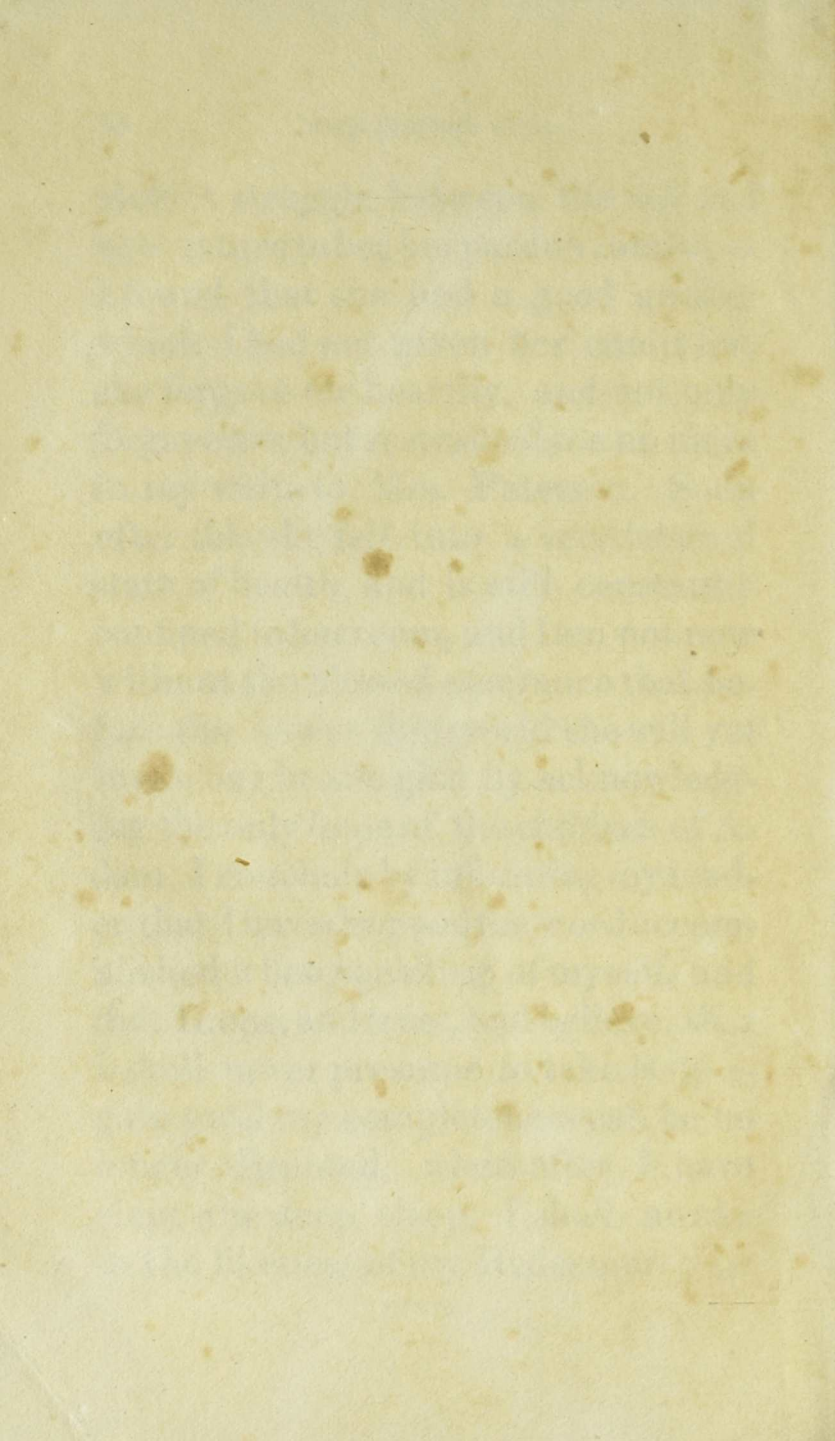
Without entering with me into any questions respecting my former

life and opinions, she set herself at once boldly to open out to me the whole system of salvation by Christ our Lord, proving from this immense effort of divine mercy, this vast and unspeakable proof of the love of God for his creatures, the total misery and helplessness of man, and the folly, nay blasphemy, of his presumption in daring to think that he can, by any of his own imperfect endeavours, add aught to the perfect work wrought by the Almighty. This method was blessed to me, and though no preacher can give life to the dead, yet have I often since reflected, that were more of Christ taught in every assembly of Christians, more minds would be prepared to receive the truth, than are now found to meet the more garbled and less true and interesting statements too often presented to the members of the visible church ; for it is in

mercy and love to the pure teacher that God prepares the willing hearer ; and it is often in mercy too, that he withholds that willing hearer, when the doctrines which are taught are mixed up and adulterated with false principles.

But the school girl is departing from her character, and I fear that many of my young readers will think that I am growing too serious. Well then to return to my narrative—when my aunt Darkman found the change which was wrought in me through what she considered the influence of Mrs. Paterson, we had several violent disputes, and in order that I might not be suffered to think that I was growing suddenly a perfect saint, I was so far left to myself that I behaved excessively ill to her, and defied her authority. I was, however, made sensible after a while of this sin. I was induced after a

violent struggle between the old and new nature to beg her pardon ; and then I found that she had a good quality which I had not given her credit for, she forgave me heartily, and not only forgave me, but restrained me no more in my visits to Mrs. Paterson. Soon after this she fell into a very languid state of health, and is still constantly confined to her room, and I am not now without the blessed assurance that before she leaves this world she will yet make our hearts glad by acknowledging the only hope of the children of Adam. I conclude by informing my reader that I have dropped the word accomplished when speaking of myself, and that I hope, and trust, and believe, that I shall never presume to take it up again until my completeness can be no longer disputed, when after I have slept the deep sleep, I shall awake in the likeness of my Redeemer.





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