A MAN OF HIS WORD

C·K·P·C

HESBA STRETTON

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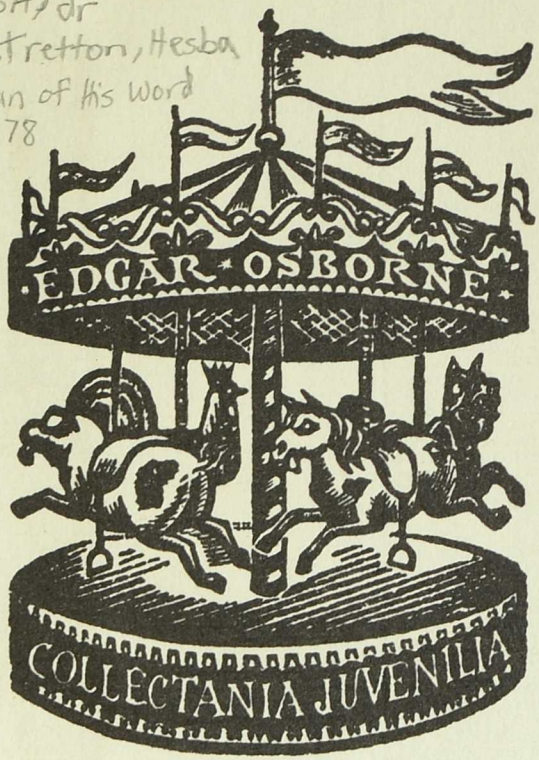

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MAN OF HIS WORD.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "LOST GIP," ETC.

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CONTENTS.

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CHAPTER I.

HIS ONLY CHILD.

If you take a railway map of England and Wales, you will see that, in spite of its close network of railroads, meeting and crossing in all directions, there are still many tracts of country where the villages must be several miles from any station. In these out-of-the-way spots life is more at a standstill now, than even in the days when stage-coaches and waggons were wont to run from town to town, taking the villages in their route, and carrying with them the common gossip of a whole neighbourhood. Twenty-five or thirty years ago, before the railway system was as fully developed as it is at present, but when it had already given a death-blow to the old coaching business, many a village was cut off thus

from its former intercourse with the outer world, and left to live apart from the common life of the nation, or to find its own way to a reunion.

In such a remote place, on the borderland which is half English and half Welsh, lived Christmas Williams. The village was scarcely more than a hamlet, having no pretension to a village street, its scattered cottages standing alone in their own gardens. A brown, shallow, brawling little river, which filled the quiet air with its singing, ran along under the churchyard walls, over which the tall lime-trees threw their deep shadows on the busy stream. West of the churchyard, still on the bank of the river, lay Christmas Williams' garden: his special, favourite garden, not the common piece of ground beside his house open to every foot, but his own locked-up, fenced-in plot, reached by a foot-path across his orchard.

Just within sight of the church stood Christmas Williams' house, the village inn, holding a conspicuous position on a slope of ground, with a primitive sort of terrace in front of it; over the wall of which he could often be seen leaning to look down on the carts and waggons passing in the lane below, and to send messages, some friendly and some hostile, by the drivers to their masters, on the various farm-steads lying round the village.

There was no one in the neighbourhood who was considered better off, or who had so widespread an influence as Christmas. He had been churchwarden for many years, as well as constable of the township; for rural police were not yet in existence. It was he who kept the keys of the church as well as of the crib, which was a small jail built in one corner of the churchyard, and the terror of all the children of the parish.

Yet the crib was seldom occupied, except sometimes after a club-day at the village inn, when any drunken brawl was sure to exite Christmas Williams' wrath, and bring down swift punishment on the offenders. It was in vain to urge the argument that hard drinking was to his own profit; he only permitted his customers to have as much as he considered good for them; and if by any mischance they overstepped the doubtful line between sobriety and drunkenness, down came the keys of the crib, to which, as constable, he felt pledged to commit all brawlers and disturbers of the public peace.

There was not a soul for miles round, as far as the distant town to which he went to market twice a month, who did not know Christmas Williams to be a just, upright man, and, above all, a man of his word. His word was as good as another man's oath. His father had kept the village inn before

him, and had borne the same character. His grandfather, too, had been landlord, churchwarden and constable; an honest, plodding man. The house, with its wainscoted walls, and its large, open kitchen, spacious enough to hold comfortably all the men in the village; the office of churchwarden, with its close connection with the rector; and the post of constable, making him the official guardian of the public peace: all these had become almost as hereditary as the estates of the duke, who owned a good part of the county. The duke was not prouder of his descent and name than was Christmas Williams.

It was a peaceful, pretty village, with low round hills encircling it, their soft outlines stretching across the sky, with coppices of young larch-trees and dark Scotch firs climbing up their slopes. The air, sweeping over a thousand meadows, where cowslips and buttercups grew in profusion, bore no slightest taint of the smoke of cities. A soft tranquillity seemed to brood over the place in almost unbroken silence. The gray old church, with no charm about it except its age, wore a look of idleness and disuse; as if it had done with active service, and was resting before settling down into ruins. Even on Sundays the doors yawned merely to admit a handful of old-fashioned, steady-going people, who listened

sleepily to the old rector, as he read to them one of Blair's Sermons, out of a volume from his library, not even taking the decent trouble of making a manuscript copy of it.

The rector was an unmarried man, with few ideas beyond the pursuit of country pleasures, which he had followed so long that they had mastered him, and now held him in utter bondage. He was keen after a fox, and could not keep away from a coursing match. His parishioners saw much more of him in Christmas Williams' snug fireside corner than in his desk and pulpit.

Who can tell how the mischief crept in? Little by little, step by step; first a Sunday-school class in Widow Evans' cottage; a quiet prayer-meeting or two; then an afternoon preaching. A change was coming over the village; or, more truly speaking, over a small portion of the villagers, but those were the steadiest and best. Christmas took no notice of it at first; and the rector cared for none of those things.

The Sunday-school could hardly come under Christmas Williams' eyes, for he spent the most of every Sunday in his garden by the churchyard, scanning his well-kept beds, and strolling to and fro along the walks, from which he could see the head-stones on his father and grandfather's graves, and

be forced sometimes to think of the far-off time when his own should be standing beside them. It was the chief trouble of his prosperous life that he had no son to carry on the name of Christmas Williams. Still his trouble was a slight one, for he had a gentle, pretty little daughter, whom he had christened Easter, and whom he loved almost as if she had been a son. Easter must marry young and well, that he might hear her children call him grandfather.

But when the afternoon preaching began, and Widow Evans' son, a young stripling who was not yet out of his time as a draper's apprentice, stood up boldly, and with ready speech taught his fellow-villagers what he himself was learning in the distant market-town, of eternity, of the Saviour, and of God, Christmas roused himself. Worse than that, by and by the lad brought with him a grave, earnest, eloquent man, who preached such words as pricked the people to their hearts, and sent them home talking and pondering over these new things. It was high time for Christmas to bestir himself, both as churchwarden and constable.

"You can do nothing, Christmas," said the rector, sitting in his favourite chimney corner, while Easter, as she went about her work softly and quickly, filled his glass for him from the brown jug on the

table between him and her father. "Come, live and let live. They don't hurt me, and they ought not to hurt you. What harm is there in a bit of psalm-singing and Bible-reading in a cottage! Bless you! I wonder any one of them sets his foot inside the church; and I'll be the last to blame them if they don't."

"I've said I'll put a stop to it, and I'll do it," cried Christmas. "I'm a man of my word. I'll duck young Evans in my horsepond if I can only catch him. They shall be cut up root and branch. You'll see I'll make short work of it."

"You cannot hinder them from meeting in Widow Evans' house, my man," replied the rector; "and you cannot stop them singing and praying, and preaching, as they please. She's my tenant, and I'll not disturb her, poor soul! Let the thing alone, I say. Nobody knows better than me that it was a mistake putting me into the church; I'm no more fit for it than for heaven itself. If I believed it would do me any good, I'd go to their meetings myself."

He spoke sadly, and bent his head down for a minute; and Easter, seeing it, drew nearer to the gray-haired old clergyman, whom she had known and loved all her lifetime.

"Well, if I cannot put a stop to it," exclaimed

Christmas, "no man, woman, or child goes from my house to any of those fools' meetings. Whoever does that shall never cross my threshold again."

Easter's fair face grew pale, and her hands trembled as she rested them for support on the table at which they were sitting. But there was a steady light in her eyes, resolute as her father's, as she fastened them upon his angry face.

"Father," she said, in a low, tremulous voice, "father, I've been there every Sunday since they began. And I am converted, and believe in God, and I must obey Him rather than you."

CHAPTER II.

"CAST OUT."

EASTER hardly knew how heroic an act was her confession of faith in God. She was a little afraid of her father, but her love of him was deep, though untried; and, like thousands of other converts to Christianity, from the days of our Lord himself, when the man born blind was cast out and disowned by his parents, she had felt no fear of the cruel and unnatural separation which might befall her through any bigotry and obstinacy of her father. She stood in the flickering firelight, which was bright enough for them to see, without any other light, her eyes glistening, and the colour coming and going on her face, ready to fling her arms round her father's neck, and burst into a passion of tears upon his breast. But his face was harsh and stormy, as he stood up with his stern eyes riveted upon her.

"Say that once more, Easter," he muttered, "and you'll never darken my doors again."

"No, no, my man! No, no, Williams!" interposed the rector hastily. "Let Easter alone. I'll answer for her. She has always been a good girl, and she'll be a good girl now."

"What does the girl mean, then," asked Christmas angrily, "talking of being converted, and believing in God? I can say, 'I believe in God Almighty,' and all the rest of it, as well as any man or woman in England. Easter means more than that; don't you, girl?"

"Yes, father," she answered, in a firm low voice; "I mean they've taught me how sinful I am, and how the Lord Jesus Christ did really die on the cross to save me, and that God loves me as if He was my real father. I'm not saying it like I used to say it in church, out of a book. I believe it with all my heart."

"Then you've taken up with a lot o' cant, and you may march out of my house, and see what cant and them that cant will do for you," said Christmas, white with fury. It was all in vain that the rector remonstrated and pleaded for Easter, and that Easter herself knelt at his feet and with many tears besought him to let her stay at home. He vowed that unless she would recall all she had said, and promise solemnly never to hold intercourse with any of the canting lot again, he would never more call her

daughter, or look upon her in any other light than as an enemy.

Next morning, at the earliest dawn of day, Easter quitted her home. She had not tried to sleep; and she knew her father had not slept, for she had heard his heavy footstep moving to and fro in his bedroom. It had been his command that she should leave the shelter of his roof as soon as it was light, and she was obeying him. For the last time she opened her little casement, and looked out on the garden below, where the roses and hollyhocks and sunflowers were in blossom, and where the bees in the hive under her window were already beginning to stir. She was going away, not knowing whither she went: but she believed that God would be as faithful to His promises as her father was to his word.

As she went slowly and sadly along the village lane, where the cottagers were still asleep, all the old familiar places looked strange at this strange hour and in the grey dawn. Even the churchyard, where she had played for hours together as a child, seemed different and foreign to her, as though she was cut off from all relations with it and her past life. Where was she to go? Whom could she turn to? She must not stay with Widow Evans, lest it should displease her father more. She was passing under the rectory wall, when she heard the old rector's voice

calling her, "Easter!" he cried, "Easter, what are you about to do? Are you going to forsake your father?"

"He has cast me off," she answered, weeping; "he will not let me stay if I do not deny God."

"Dear! dear! dear!" cried the old rector; "he's an obstinate man, and I don't know what to say between you. You are two wilful ones, I fear. But I'll do my best to bring him round; and here, my lassie, here's five pounds for you, and a letter to my cousin, who will find you a place somewhere. Good-by, and God bless you, Easter."

"Do you believe in God?" asked Easter, looking up at him through her tears.

"Of course I do," he answered testily, "and so does your father. We believe in Him after one fashion, and you after another. But, Easter, yours is the best, I know."

He uttered the last words in a mournful tone, and watched her as she went sadly on her lonely way, until the hawthorn hedge hid her form from his sight. She was as nearly as possible like his own child to him; he had watched her growing up from day to day through all the changes of childhood and girlhood. He was a kindly old man, and loved to be at peace and on good terms with every one. And here was a brangle in the very centre of his parish, mak-

ing desolate the house he frequented most. Besides, he could recall a time when he had felt the worth of a courageous faith like that which had sent Easter out into a world she knew nothing of, in simple reliance upon God and implicit obedience to the Saviour whose name she had taken. She was a Christian. Was he a Christian, too? The old rector thought of his self-indulgences, his country pleasures, and his neglected people; but he felt his heart heavy and dull. He could not lift it out of the miry clay in which it had grovelled so long.

Easter's absence made a greater difference to Christmas Williams than he would ever have owned in words. He had never let her toil laboriously with her own hands, as her mother and grandmother had done before her; he had been too choice of her for that. Easter had been like his favourite garden, where no common fruit or flowers were suffered to grow. He had delighted in her dainty, winsome ways, as he had delighted in his splendid show of roses, and of peaches growing ripe in the sun. He missed her sorely. There was no pretty, smiling face blooming opposite to him when he sat down to his now solitary meals. There was no light footstep tripping about the house; no sweet voice singing gaily or plaintively the old songs he had taught her himself. She was never to be seen leaning over the

terrace-wall, watching for his coming along the lane. He had no one to buy some pretty trifle for when he went to market. Christmas had not foreseen the dreary change. Possibly, if he had foreseen it, he would never have uttered the oath he had bound upon his conscience.

All the neighbourhood took notice of the gloom that had fallen upon Christmas and his once pleasant house. He had always been a masterful man, but he grew morose and tyrannical as time passed on. His servants, who had been used to stay long periods with him, were constantly quitting his service, and carried away with them stories of his harsh and unreasonable conduct. The home gradually became dull and dirty, with no mistress to look after the maids. It was less and less tempting to gather about the large fireplace of an evening, as had been the practice for generations past. The rector had offended Christmas by interceding for Easter, and by pooh-poohing his fiery zeal against the meetings in Widow Evans' cottage, and he turned into the village inn but seldom now. Christmas felt this to the very soul; but he was too proud to speak of it, or to yield an inch to his clergyman. It was reported, moreover, that the ale was badly brewed, or was kept in sour casks; a fact that might possibly have had something to do with

the rector's fewer visits, and with their brevity when he came.

Christmas made no effort to learn any tidings of his daughter; but the neighbours took care he should hear them. She had taken a place as upper nurse in the family of the rector's cousin, who lived in the market-town he attended; and now and then he fancied he saw her threading her way through the busy streets on a market-day. A year or two after she left home, he heard she had married Widow Evans' son, a poor, delicate young man, assistant only in the draper's shop where he had served his apprenticeship. Christmas cursed him bitterly in his heart; though he never uttered his name, or Easter's, with his lips. The letters Easter wrote to him he returned unopened; but none the less bitter was his resentment that she should marry without his consent. She was his daughter still, though he vowed she was not.

Presently came the news that a grandson was born to him. His own grandson! He heard it on market-day, and the farmers who were about him, buying and selling their corn, watched him inquisitively to see how he took the news. Not a change came over his hard, grim face; yet suddenly in his mind rose up the memory of that sunny Easter Sunday, when the bells were ringing joyously in the old

church-tower for the resurrection of the Lord, and some one brought to him his first-born child. Another memory followed close upon it—the evening shadows of the same day closing round him as he knelt beside his dying wife, and heard her whisper in her last faint tones, "I leave my baby to you, dear Christmas!" All his lonely way home that night these two visions haunted him.

Still six months later further tidings reached his ears. Two or three of his oldest and most faithful guests, who yet lingered of an evening on the old hearth, were talking together, seated within the old screen, which concealed him from their sight, though they had a shrewd guess that he was within hearing.

"Widow Evans' son is dead," said one, "and he's left poor Easter a widow, with her babe!"

"What's she going to do?" asked another of the party.

"They say she's bound to come home to Widow Evans," was the answer. "She's ailing, is Widow Evans, and growing simple; she wants somebody to fend for her. And who so natural as Easter, poor lass? They were praying for her at the meeting last Sunday, and praying hard for *him*, as the Lord 'ud soften his heart. You know who! It'll take a deal o' softening, I'm thinking."

"Ay! ay!" agreed all the company.

"They say Easter's as white as a corpse," went on the speaker. "Eh! but she'll be a sight to move a heart o' stone, I say, with her babe, and her pretty young face pinched up in a widow's cap. She's naught but a girl yet; I recollect her birthday as if it was yesterday. Oh! but what a feast we should ha' been sure of, in this very house, if Easter had never taken up wi' those new-fangled ways, and had married to please her father! But Christmas is too hard, I say."

"Ay! that he is," rejoined the other voices with one consent.

"Widow Evans' money is no more than five pounds a quarter," he continued, and it dies when she dies. It will be close living for two women and a growing boy; though women know how to starve and famish better than men do, God help them! And to think of Christmas being so well off! better than anybody knows fairly, with heaps o' money in the bank. He oughtn't to be so hard!"

CHAPTER III.

HIS GRANDSON.

CHRISTMAS, as they guessed, overheard all their gossip, as he sat in his own little room behind the screen, with the door ajar. He felt pricked and stung, and he stole away noiselessly, that none of them might know he had been there, and went down to his garden beside the river, where he was secure of being alone. His heart had always been readily melted at the thought of a widow's loneliness and helplessness ; and now Easter was coming back to her native place, his little daughter, a poor, friendless widow, burdened with a child ! Why ! it seemed but a few days ago that she was tottering along these smooth walks, her little feet tripping at the smallest pebble, and her little fingers clasping his own thick finger closely. How long was it since she watched with him the ripening of the fruit upon the trees, and with all a child's delight took from his hands the first that was ready for gathering ! How many a time had Easter been seated dry and warm

on his wheelbarrow, and watched him at work, digging, and pruning, and grafting with his own hands, while he listened all the while to her prattle! Those were happy, blessed days! And all these pure and innocent joys might be beginning for him again. His little grandson would soon be old enough to totter along these same garden-paths, and to call him grandfather. He felt almost heartsick as he looked at the dream for a moment.

But it was only for a moment. Christmas could not relent; his long-cherished pride in being a man of his word could not so easily be conquered. He lashed himself up into more bitter anger against Easter for this momentary weakness. She might pinch and starve, for him. It was a strange sort of religion that set a daughter at variance against her father; and those who preached it might provide for those who believed them. He would not suffer it, or any one who professed it, in his house—no, not for a day. He would let Easter know that if she would humble herself, and promise, even now, to have done with these new notions, he would take her and her boy home again. But never—he looked across at his father's and grandfather's graves as he swore it—never should any canting nonsense be spoken under his roof.

Easter was reluctant to come back to her native

village, but there was no one else to wait upon and nurse her aged mother-in-law. It was harder work than any one supposed to live on eight shillings a-week; what had been just enough for one was far too little for three. Easter hoped that it would be possible to get a little needlework from some of the neighbours' wives; if not, she must take to field-work, and go out weeding and hoeing with the poorest of the villagers. There proved to be very little work for her needle; so Easter might be seen going out to the fields early in the morning on those days when her mother was well enough to take care of little Chrissie: for she had called her boy after her father, both because she loved the old name, and because she cherished a secret hope that he would own him as his grandson.

But that hope slowly yet surely died away as year after year passed by, and no sign was given by Christmas Williams that he ever saw his daughter. He could not but see her almost daily about the village, and he could not go to his meadows without passing the little cottage where she and her baby dwelt. He saw her plainly enough: the sad girlish face, worn with sorrow and hard times, that gazed at him with beseeching eyes. He had sent his message to her, and she had answered firmly that she could not go back from professing her faith in Christ. The

first time they met after that, Easter turned pale, nearly as pale as her dead mother had been when he saw her last in her coffin, and she had uttered, in the same clear yet faint voice as that in which her mother had breathed good-by, the one word, "Father!"

Christmas heard her as distinctly as if the word had been shouted in his ear, but he passed on in silence with a heavy frown upon his face; though in his heart of hearts there was a secret hope that she would run after him, and catch him by the arm, and hang about his neck, and not let him go—let him speak as roughly as he might—until she had forced him to be reconciled to her. If Easter had but known!

Now that Easter was at home in her mother's cottage, the meetings, which had become irregular on account of Widow Evans' failing health, began again with renewed vigour. Every Sunday a large class was held in the cottage, and Easter started a singing-class, taught by herself, which attracted all the young folks of the place to it. There was a slow, but quite a perceptible change in the little village. Even the farmers and their wives would sometimes condescend to be present at the service when some preacher from town was coming, for the old rector was growing more and more careless of

his duties, and the conviction was spreading that there was need of some change. There was a rumour that the duke had been asked to grant land for the purpose of building a chapel, and that he was willing to do it if the majority of the parishioners wished it. The rector said nothing against it, but Christmas Williams, as churchwarden, opposed it with unflagging vehemence. The scheme, if ever indeed there had been one, must have fallen through for want of funds; but the mere rumour of it helped to widen the breach between him and his daughter.

In the meanwhile Chrissie was growing as fast as a healthy child grows who is always out in the open air, braving all kinds of weather, and only kept indoors by sleep. He was a lovely baby, and a bold, bonny little boy, restless, daring, and resolute; a favourite with all the neighbours, as Easter herself had been in her motherless childhood. Chrissie was free of every house in the village: there was no door closed to him except his grandfather's, and a seat at every table was ready for Easter's child. His mother, busy with making both ends meet, hardly knew how to put a stop to the boy's vagrant life. As soon as he was old enough to dress himself, he would be up and away at the earliest dawn, rambling about the fields and hedgerows, climbing the trees, or helping to bring in the cows to be milked from

the meadows, where they had passed the short, cool, summer nights. Chrissie seemed to be everywhere, and to know everything that passed in the neighbourhood. Many an hour of silent prayer while she was at work, and many an hour of wakeful anxiety during the night, did Easter pass. So long, however, as Chrissie did not fall into any evil ways, she was wise enough to leave him free. He was truthful and affectionate, and on the whole obedient; and no child could be more apt to learn and remember the little lessons she tried to teach him whenever she had time.

Such a child was sure to be constantly under the ken of his grandfather. It was barely possible for a day to pass without Christmas Williams having him under his eye half-a-dozen times. He could hear the shrill young voice calling up the cows, before he left his chamber in the morning. He would find Chrissie swinging on the gates of his neighbours' fields, never on his own, the handsome face rosy with delight. Sometimes, in a more quiet mood, the lad would turn into the old churchyard, close beside his garden; and one day Christmas, hidden behind a tree, hearkened to him spelling out the epitaph on his forefathers' headstones in a clear, slow voice, loud enough for half the village to hear.

Was it love or hatred for the boy that filled his

heart? Christmas could not tell, though to himself he called it hatred. It was a constant source of mortification and bitterness to see one of his own flesh and blood wandering about in ragged clothing, and half barefoot, and to know that he was fed by the charity of his neighbours, who were poor folks compared with himself. After all it was but little satisfaction to look over his savings, and see how rich he was growing, while the very boy, who ought in nature to be his heir, was hardly better than a beggar. Not that he would leave a farthing to Easter or her child. His will was already made, and his money was bequeathed to rebuild the decaying church, of which he and his forefathers had been faithful wardens so long, and where a marble tablet on the walls should proclaim the deed and keep his memory alive.

Churchwarden and constable he was yet; but the other post he had inherited from his father was gone. Though no chapel had been built in the parish, a new inn had been opened, and Christmas, in angry disgust, had not renewed his old license. He had a farm, which occupied him in the daytime; but the evenings and nights were dreary past telling. The large old kitchen, once filled with neighbours, was now always empty and silent, and seemed to need more than ever the presence of a child to cheer it up.

Christmas used to fall into half-waking, half-sleeping dreams, in which his little grandson was gambolling about the place, and filling it with noise and laughter. He could see Easter, sitting opposite to him, in the cosy chimney-corner, smiling back to him whenever she caught his eye. Why had he ever vowed that such times should never be?

Loving him or hating him, Chrissie was never out of his grandfather's thoughts. He took note of every change in him, as he shot up rapidly from infancy to the age when lads like him, little lads of eight, were sent to work in the fields. He knew the exact day when Chrissie went out for his first day's work, and he watched him from afar off, plodding up and down the heavy furrows of the ploughed land to scare away the birds from the springing corn. He saw how footsore and weary the little fellow was, as he trudged homewards through the dusky lanes, too tired to whistle and sing as he was wont to do.

Better than Easter herself, he knew how old Chrissie was when he began to walk, or jump, or run, and he had seen what Easter did not see—the first time Chrissie ever climbed a tree. The lad's childhood brought back his own to him. He could look back upon the days when he had gone nutting under the same hedgerows, and fishing for minnows in the little brown river. Chrissie would stand

patiently an hour at a time on his own favourite spots, waiting for the long-hoped-for nibble. To watch the boy was like reading over again an old, half-forgotten story. But there was no softening of his heart towards Easter. Many a time he wished the lad had never crossed his path, or that he was a sickly, puny child, such as his father had been before him, who "stayed at home, tied to his mother's apron-strings, singing hymns, and making believe he was a special favourite with God Almighty."

CHAPTER IV.

HIS OWN WAY.

OLD Widow Evans died, and her small annuity died with her. What was Easter to do, encumbered as she was with a big, restless, daring, bold son, eight years of age? She could not bear to think of leaving him to the care of the neighbours, and going out to service again. Yet it would be hard work for some years to keep herself and him in anything like decent poverty. Her cottage, however, was built on the glebe land, and therefore belonged to the rector, who offered it to her rent-free as long as he should live.

But the rector was growing old and very feeble, being partially exhausted by those habits of self-indulgence which he had not been strong enough to break off. For a long while now his favourite vices had clung about him like a heavy chain, which he could not escape from, however sorrowfully his spirit chafed and fretted against its bondage.

"Easter," he said, "I want to have you near at

hand when I 'm lying on my deathbed. I cannot alter my habits now; but I long to be gone away from them, and I shall want to have you near me when my last hour comes, I know."

"Why cannot you alter them now?" she asked; "God will help you."

"It's too late; too late," he answered. "If I'd only been wise in time, Easter! But I'm a foolish old man now."

It was winter when these words were spoken, half-sadly, half-angrily by the rector; and all through the following spring and summer he was ailing often; and Easter was always sent for in haste to nurse him. He could find no rest or peace of mind without her. Chrissie in consequence was left to run wilder than ever, his grandmother being dead, and his mother frequently away from home. When she had to stay all night at the rectory, he went to sleep in some of the cottages near at hand. The cottage folks made much of him, both for Easter's sake, and because they had a settled conviction that he must some day or other inherit his grandfather's heaps of money. That all the old fields, and the ancient house, and the wealth gathered together by two or three generations, should go anywhere except to Chrissie, seemed almost incredible. He was looked upon as too young to pay much attention to what

elder folks talked about; but he often heard them speaking of the place as belonging in some way to him. In fact, Chrissie began to look upon his dreaded grandfather himself as his special property.

Harvest-time had come; a rich and plentiful harvest, such as opened the hearts of all who possessed golden cornfields. It was splendid weather, too; and there was no stint of good cheer and grand harvest-home suppers in all the farmsteads. Chrissie was in his element, riding triumphantly on the high-piled waggons, or as willingly tugging at the heads of the great horses that drew the heavy loads to the stackyards. He was at every feast except his grandfather's; and even there Christmas, while carving at the head of the table, caught sight of the bright, brown little face peeping wistfully in through the open door. All the village was present, for though Christmas had lost much of his popularity, his old neighbours shrank from offending him by staying away from his harvest-home. Not all, though. It had been the rector's custom to be present at the yearly feast, but this autumn his familiar face and voice were missing, and the mention of his name caused a passing gloom to fall on all faces.

"The poor old gentleman's not long for this world," said one of the farmers; "they say Easter 's never left him day or night this last week."

Christmas Williams' face grew hard and dark at this bold mention of his daughter's forbidden name; but he said nothing. The supper went on, but while they were still singing their harvest songs, a messenger came hurriedly from the rectory, to call Christmas to his old clergyman's death-bed.

He obeyed the summons with reluctance. Not because he had no wish to bid his old friend farewell, and grasp his hand once more, but because he dreaded meeting his daughter. It was as he thought. When he entered the chamber of the dying man, there sat Easter beside the bed, pale, and sad, and wan; nothing like the fair young girl she was ten years ago, before he uttered his fatal oath. He would not let his eyes wander towards her, but fastened them earnestly on the rector's shrunken face.

"You see who is at my side?" said the dying old man.

"Yes," he answered.

"Christmas, my man," continued the rector, faintly, I want to do one good deed before I die. Easter has been like a daughter to me. I beg of you, for our old friendship's sake, be reconciled to her before I die.

"I'm a man of my word," answered Christmas sternly, "and everybody knows it. If Easter will give up her foolish, canting ways, and come home

to be as she used to be in my house, she may come and bring her boy with her. But this is the last chance I'll give her."

"Christmas," said the dying voice, "Easter's ways are the right ways; her faith is the true faith. Would to God I could believe and feel as she does! If I could only believe as she does, that God has forgiven all my sins, and that I have only to close my eyes and fall asleep under a Father's care! Do you think she will be miserable, as I am, when she comes to die? And when you come to die, what will it avail you that you have said with your lips, Sunday after Sunday, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty,' if they are nothing but words to you? They are only words in your mouth; they are truths to Easter. You are not a man of your word in that, Christmas, my man."

"Father," sobbed Easter, and her voice seemed to pierce him to the heart, though he hardened it against her, "father, forgive me if I have sinned against you. Oh! forgive me, and be reconciled to me! I will do anything—"

Her voice was broken off by weeping.

"Will you give up the ways I hate?" he asked, doggedly and almost fiercely.

"I cannot!" she cried; "I cannot! I must obey God rather than you. I must be true."

"What has it to do with God?" he asked, "it's naught but your own obstinacy. You are a wilful woman, Easter, and you will have your own way. I don't see what God has to do with it."

"Good-by, old friend," said the rector, as Christmas turned away to leave the room in a rage; "these are my last words to you. Be reconciled to Easter if you desire to be reconciled to God."

Christmas strode back to the bedside, grasped the old man's chilly hand, and faltered out, "Good-by." But he would not cast another glance at his daughter.

"Easter," said the rector, "I, too, have been a wilful man, and taken my own way, and now God refuses to be reconciled to me. He is set against me as your father is set against you."

"Is He?" she answered softly; "then don't you see that my father would take me home again as his child, if I could only repent, and give up my way to his! He is only set against me so long as I keep to my own way. It is so with God. 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' And oh! He is always ready to be reconciled to us; He cannot set himself against any one of us. You have but to repent, and give up your own ways, and He will take you home again."

"But I am taken out of my own ways," he groaned; "I have nothing now to give up."

"Yet God knows if you truly repent of them," she urged. "He sees whether you are willing to give them up. If you can only believe in our Lord's words, even now! God is our Father, Christ tells us; and He is watching for us to go home."

The old man's weary eyelids closed, and his lips moved in a whisper. Easter heard him repeating words to himself, which he had often uttered carelessly in his church; but now he seemed to speak them from his heart: "I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." She bent her head down to his failing ear.

"But when he was yet a great way off," she said, "his Father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."

"I don't know what will become of you and Chrissie when I'm gone," he said after a while; "you'll have to leave your cottage. But never give up your trust in God, Easter. Hold fast to that."

"Yes," she answered quietly.

"I ought to have been a better man among my people," he continued; "they have been as sheep having no shepherd. God will forgive my sins; but,

O Easter, it is a bitter thing to die, and be called into His presence as an unprofitable servant, who can never hear Him say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' I have never done the Lord's work, and I cannot enter into the Lord's joy."

"Blessed is he whose sins are forgiven," said Easter softly.

"Ay! but more blessed still he who has worked for Him," he whispered. "I'm taking a lost and wasted life to lay before Him. Lord, have mercy upon me!"

His voice had grown fainter and weaker; and now it failed him altogether. He lay all night, and, till morning broke, in a stupor, while Easter watched beside him. Then he passed away into the unknown life, which he had wilfully forgotten until his last hour was come.

CHAPTER V.

A CRITICAL MOMENT.

EASTER was occupied at the rectory all the next day, and being satisfied that Chrissie would be taken good care of, she gave little thought to him. It had been a sorrowful harvest-time to her, and her future had never seemed quite so dark as now that her best friend was gone, and her father showed himself altogether irreconcilable. But her trust in God was not shaken. Once for a few minutes, when there came a short interval of leisure, she stood at a window overlooking the churchyard, where every tombstone was as well known to her as the faces of her neighbours. Then the blank, dark future presented itself to her, and pressed itself upon her. There was no chance of remaining where she was, among the old familiar places, surrounded by the sights and sounds which had filled up nearly all her life. Where was she to be tossed to? What resting-place could she find? It was with a strong effort that she turned away from the dreary pros-

pect. "Take no thought for the morrow," she said to herself, "for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Christmas Williams had never been less master of himself than he was all that day after hearing that the old rector was really gone. He had been his clergyman for nearly forty years, and never had an unfriendly word passed between them, unless he could call his remonstrances on behalf of Easter unfriendly. He wished he had not left him in a rage last night. Yet never had his servants seen Christmas so testy and passionate; until at length he shut himself up in his own little room. A lad who crept timorously to peep through the lowest corner of the lattice casement, reported that the master was sitting with his face hidden by his hands, and the big, strongly-bound family Bible before him. But Christmas was not studying any portion of the printed pages; he had taken it down from the shelf over his old-fashioned desk to pore over the written entries, made in his own hand, of Easter's birth on Easter Sunday twenty-eight years before, and of her mother's death the same evening. He had given Easter her last chance, and she had spurned it; it was time to take her name out of the Bible. He had resolved to tear the page out of the

book, but he could not destroy the record of his child's birth without destroying that of his wife's death. Which must he sacrifice, his resolve to wreak his resentment against Easter, or his lingering tenderness for the memory of his wife ?

The long hours of the day passed by miserably for Christmas Williams. He was irresolute and troubled by vague doubts, such as had never disturbed him before. How could he possibly be in the wrong ? for his opinions were those of his father and grandfather before him, and his ways were like their ways. They had never given in to new-fangled notions, to psalm-singing, and meetings for prayer in cottages. It was well-known they had always been true blue. The old church was good enough and religious enough for them ; and they had been loyal to it, never missing to present themselves on a Sunday morning in the churchwarden's pew, and to keep Christmas day and Good Friday with equal strictness. If God was not pleased with such service, why, nine-tenths of the people he knew, living or dead, were in a bad way. But how could they be in the wrong, those honest, thrifty, steady forefathers of his, whose word was as good as their bond all the country through ?

Yet he could not satisfy himself, or silence the still, small voice of conscience. What sin was Easter

thief, and that thief was Easter's boy, his own grandson!

All the passion of his mingled love and hatred flamed up in Christmas Williams' heart. This merry, ragged, brown-faced, handsome lad was his own flesh and blood, and seemed to have a natural right to be there. He watched Chrissie swing himself down from the tree, and strip off his tattered jacket, and pile up the precious fruit in it. But as the boy caught sight of his grandfather's face, gazing at him over the fence, his heart stood still for very fear, and his knees knocked together. Yet he lifted up his eyes to Christmas, with a wistful, speechless prayer in them. Chrissie could not utter a word to say how the lad just returned from jail had lifted him over the fence, telling him the fruit was all his own, or would be some day. When he met his grandfather's stern frown and awful silence, his little heart died within him.

"Grandfather!" he cried at last, dropping his stolen load, and bursting into tears.

"A thief!" muttered Christmas, between his teeth. It was the first word he had ever spoken to the lad. This boy of Easter's, this grandson of his own, was a petty thief already. He thought of the urchin he had sent to jail a month ago for precisely the same offence. But Chrissie was so like himself when he

was a boy! He could recollect plucking the fruit without stint from these very trees, while his grandfather looked on with delight at his dexterity and courage in climbing to the highest boughs, and pointed out to him the ripest pears and rosiest apples. Chrissie ought to be doing the same under his eye, not standing there like a culprit, sobbing and trembling before him. Yet how could he keep his word, and make a difference between this lad and the one just out of jail for the self-same thing? Besides, now he could make Easter feel; perhaps bring her to her senses, if anything would do that. She had been reckless of his displeasure so far; this would bring her on her knees before him, ready to yield her will to his.

Without uttering a word to the terrified child, he entered his garden, and seized him by the arm, not roughly, but firmly. He had never touched him before, and his hand, firm as it was, trembled. Chrissie lifted his brown, tearful face to him, and submitted without any attempt at resistance. Silently his grandfather led him along the pleasant garden paths, across the deep lawn, and through the green churchyard, under the window of the room where the dead body of the rector lay, to that dismal and neglected corner, overgrown with nettles and docks, where the crib was built. It was an old, small, strongly-built

place, with windows closely barred, and a door thickly studded with iron nails. It looked prepared for the blackest criminals, rather than for the starved and poverty-stricken poachers, and the frightened urchins, who had been its usual occupants. There was a heavy padlock on the outer door, and this Christmas slowly unlocked, holding his grandson between his arms and knees, as his hands were busy at their task.

"Grandfather," sobbed the boy, "don't let mother know; it'll break her heart."

Christmas could not speak a word, for his tongue was dry and parched; but Chrissie walked in through the dark door unbidden. He listened to it being closed and fastened securely behind him. This place had been a terror and dread to him from his earliest days, when he had now and then strayed with baby feet to the moss-grown step, and heard the wind moan through the keyhole of the old lock, which had been in use before the padlock. He stepped over the threshold with the courage of despair. No hope of softening the heart of his grandfather entered his own, and he made no effort to do it. If only his mother might not know!

At present there was still a little daylight, and through the close cross-bars of the window, he could see the crimson and golden cloudlets hovering over

the setting sun. He looked away from them with dazzled eyes to examine shudderingly the interior of his prison. It was gloomy enough ; the only furniture was a low stone bench, but at one end of the bench a chain was fastened to a ring in the wall, and handcuffs and fetters were attached to the chain. He was almost glad to think that his grandfather had not chained him to that ring in the wall. Sitting down on the stone bench, Chrissie looked up again at the gradually dying colours in the sky, not caring to turn away his eyes from them, as they faded softly away into a quiet gray, which scarcely shed a gleam of light into his dismal cell.

Chrissie's courage had held out fairly ; but as the darkness gathered, his imagination awoke, and called up all the sleeping, lurking fancies which dwell in every child's young brain. They had been only biding their time, and now trooped out in crowds to haunt the lonely lad. All the stories he had ever heard of people being imprisoned for many, many years, and even starved to death, hurried through his excited mind. There had been a tale told for generations in the village, of a man who had killed himself in this very place. And were there not outside the wall, amidst the docks and nettles, the forsaken graves of people, too wicked to lie even in death among their better neighbours? Every one

dreaded being buried there. Was it true that ghosts of wicked people could not rest in their graves, but came forth at night to visit the places they had once dwelt in, and to tell fearful secrets to those they found alone? How fast the night was coming on, and he was quite alone!

Nobody knew where he was, thought poor little Chrissie; nobody but his grandfather, who hated him. He could not climb as high as the window, barred as it was, to show himself through it. He was sorry almost that he had asked that his mother might not know. She would never, never know what had become of him, and he fancied he could see her weeping for him through long years. For he felt certain he should die in this dreary prison, and his grandfather would bury him secretly at night, amid the wicked people who lay under the docks and nettles.

The church clock struck ten. It was quite dark by this time, except for the pale, ghostly gleam of the strip of sky seen through the bars of the window. The child passed through long ages of pain and terror before it struck eleven. The dreadful hour of midnight came creeping on towards him. He had never yet been awake at twelve; and twelve at night was the most awful and ghostly hour of all the twenty-four. What would happen then, he

could not guess; but something beyond all words, and beyond all thought.

Chrissie could not ask God to take care of him; for had he not been taken in the very act of breaking God's commandments? There was no one, therefore, to stand between him and the unknown horrors that were coming nearer every moment. There was no refuge, no Saviour for him. He had offended God.

A strange sound somewhere in the prison, jarred upon his ear, and with a scream of terror, which rang shrilly out into the quiet night, Chrissie lost his senses, and fell like one dead on the stone-floor.

CHAPTER VI.

A TRUE MAN.

CHRISTMAS WILLIAMS, after locking the strong, heavy door on his little grandson, had gone back to his house, having no longer the desire to spend a quiet, loitering hour in his garden. The smouldering passion, which had burst into so sudden a flame, was not yet subsiding. He had held his grandson in his hand, between his arms, had had his little face close beside his own; yet he had neither embraced nor kissed him. In the depths of his nature he was longing secretly to do so, and to claim the bold, brave little rascal for his own. When the lad turned to him and said, "Don't let mother know; it would break her heart," his pride had well nigh given way. But he had held out so long that it was like tearing up the roots of an old tree to yield now. What would the world say, if he went back from his word? How he would be jeered at, if Easter was seen going from his door to those canting meetings!

He had some vague idea of an ancient magistrate who had doomed his own son to death, because he

had sworn so to punish the offenders against the laws. He had heard read in church how Saul had pronounced the same fatal sentence upon his eldest son, Jonathan. "God do so and more also: for thou shalt surely die, Jonathan," said Saul. These were men true to their word. How could he look his neighbours in the face if he meted out one measure of punishment to one thief, and another to his grandson?

But for one of his own blood to go to jail! Christmas Williams' grandson a jail-bird! He wished earnestly he had not been so hard on the young rascals who had robbed his orchard before, so that he might have had a decent pretext for letting off Chrissie. He did not doubt that it would break Easter's heart, and he had merely wished to break her will. They said lads never got over the shameful fact of having been sent to jail; that it clung to them for life. His own experience taught him pretty much the same lesson; he had never known such a lad recover from the disgrace and become a thoroughly respectable man. He could count half-a-dozen instances. The shadow of the jail stretched itself all across their after lives. If he had only given the last young thief a few stripes, and sent him about his business, he might have done the same for Chrissie.

As the evening passed away, these troublous thoughts grew more clamorous. He was sitting on the hearth where his forefathers had spent their quiet evenings before him—good, honest men; and possibly he might live to hear of his grandson, their child as well as his, being convicted of some great crime, and sentenced to transportation or penal servitude for life. It would have been himself that had given the child the first push down the long and awful flight of steps leading to the terrible gulf. That would be the shameful end of his upright, thrifty, truth-loving race. Had he then any right to doom his family, and its own honoured name, to such a close? Could he not yet turn back only a half-step, and take another road? He had not gone too far on this perilous path. Not a soul knew that Chrissie was locked up in the old crib. He would see if he could make the boy promise faithfully not to tell if he released him. He had the old blood in his veins, and perhaps young as he was, he could keep a promise.

The clock had struck eleven before Christmas came to this conclusion, a halting, half-false conclusion, of which he was inwardly ashamed. He did not like taking a middle course, so he rose up slowly, and leisurely opened the house-door, still hesitating about this compromise with his

resolution to treat Easter and her boy as if they were utter strangers. He crossed the lane and paced along the churchyard with very slow footsteps. All was silent in the village; the only sounds to be heard were the brawling of the river and the hooting of the white owl in his barnyard. There was but one light to be seen, excepting the glimmer through the window of that room where the dead was lying, and that light was up in one of the rectory attics, shining brightly into the darkness of the night. Very likely it was Easter's candle, thought her father ; she loved to keep the window open on summer nights.

Christmas was a man who knew nothing of fear, superstitious fear above all. He paced to and fro in the dark churchyard, thinking of how he should deal with the boy, and in what manner he should dispose of him for the rest of the night. Certainly he would upbraid and threaten him; call him a thief and a disgrace, young and little as he was. He must frighten him well. But where was he to take his grandson ? All the cottagers were gone to bed; and it would never do to call them up to take in Chrissie, and so learn the very weakness he wished to hide.

It never occurred to him that the young child was already frightened almost to death. He had seen

him only as bold and daring, and he could not understand a nature that was full of vague fancies and imaginations, and superstitions fed on the village traditions. He fitted the key into the padlock before he had quite settled what he was about to do ; and at that instant Chrissie's wild and agonized shriek rang through the air. The sound almost paralyzed him. How he managed to turn the key he could not tell. He rushed into the utter darkness of the cell, where he could see nothing and hear nothing. "Chrissie!" he cried, " Chrissie, my little man ! I'm here ; thy grandfather, my lad. I'm not angry with thee any longer. Speak to me, I've come to take thee home ; and thou shalt have as many apples as thee pleases. O Chrissie, whereabouts art thou ? Rouse up and speak to me."

There was neither voice nor sob to answer him or to guide him. Gropping about in the darkness, he found the little unconscious body of the child lying in a heap on the stone-floor. He lifted it up tenderly, and pressed it again and again to his heart. He felt no longer any kind of doubt as to what he would say or do. If he could only hear the boy's voice, he would throw to the winds all his cherished anger and resolution, and take his grandson and his daughter home again.

He carried Chrissie into the churchyard, speaking

to him imploringly to wake up and give him some sign of life. As he looked up to the attic window where the light was burning, he saw Easter's head leaning out. The cry that had frightened him had startled her also; and she was listening for it again. Christmas called to her.

"Easter, come down," he cried in a lamentable voice; "your boy is dead, perhaps; and it's your father killed him. O Chrissie, my little grandson, rouse thee, and speak only one word."

In another minute Easter was down and beside them, chafing the cold hands of her boy, and stroking his face, and calling him with her tenderest voice. But still he lay like one dead on his grandfather's breast.

"Easter," said her father, with a deep drawn breath, "I found the child stealing apples in my garden, and I dealt with him as I've dealt with others. I locked him up in the crib, and left him alone there. I was about to let him free again when I heard that terrible shriek, and I found him like this. Easter, can you forgive me?"

"Father!" she answered, in a mournful, solemn voice, "I forgive you with all my heart."

"What! if the child dies?" asked Christmas, trembling and faltering as he uttered the words.

"Yes," she said, "I know you did not mean

to do it. But oh! he will not die. My little Chrissie! My only little child! Pray God he may not die.

"Kiss me, Easter," said her father.

With a strange sense of solemnity and sorrow, Easter kissed her father's face, with the lifeless body of her child lying between them.

"Come home, Easter, come home!" he said, sobbing.

Almost in silence, Christmas and his daughter trod the familiar churchyard paths once again together, trodden so many hundreds of times by them both; but never as now. He bore his beloved burden, groaning heavily from time to time. If he lost this disowned grandson, he felt as though his heart must break.

They laid Chrissie in his grandfather's own bed, and both of them watched beside him all night. The doctor, who had to be brought from his home five miles off, and who could not reach them till the day was breaking, told them that Chrissie was suffering from the effects of a severe shock, but that there was no reason to dread any abiding and serious results, if he was treated with common care.

Common care! It was no common care that was lavished upon the boy by Christmas. All the pent-up tenderness of these long years overflowed upon

Chrissie and upon his daughter, now she was at home again. To his great amazement he discovered that the world, so far from jeering at the reconciliation, applauded it far more cordially than it had ever done his stern resentment. He was congratulated on every hand for having taken home his daughter and her son; and old friends flocked about him again as they had not done for years. The whole village seemed to rejoice over the event. And when Christmas sent for the lad who had been Chrissie's predecessor in the old crib, and took him into his own service, pledging his word to make a man of him if possible, his popularity had never stood so high.

It was then, after giving up his own self-righteousness, and pulling down the wall he had built up to shut out the light of heaven, that Christmas Williams became able to learn how man can believe in God and in Jesus Christ who died for our sins. The creed he had uttered so often with his lips became the true expression of his heart. As he stood in the churchwarden's pew, reverently saying, "I believe in God the Father Almighty," and in "the forgiveness of sins," he would often glance towards Easter, who had taught him the meaning of those words; and there was nothing he loved better than to hear Chrissie's voice repeating them with him.

It is probable that Christmas Williams would have

been the first to have helped, churchwarden as he was, in building a chapel, where the simple gospel of Christ could have been preached to the villagers; but there was no longer any need for it. The clergyman who soon came to occupy the place of the old rector was an earnest, true, and enlightened servant of Christ, who knew his Master's will, and was intent upon doing it.

"A man can't be true," says Christmas, "until he is true towards God. I prided myself upon being a man of my word, and meaning all I said, though I spoke a lie every time I said, 'I believe.' I didn't believe in God, nor in Jesus Christ our Lord, nor in having any sins to be forgiven. A man must be made true in the darkest corners of his heart before he can be a man of his word."

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