

NARRATIVE SERIES.

"BE YE ALSO READY."

MATTHEW xxiv. 44.



HENRY D—— was a servant in a farmhouse on the outskirts of my parish, and as the church of the adjoining parish was nearer to his master's farm than my own, he always attended the services there. For this reason, and because he was a servant living in his master's house, I knew very little of him. He was a fine powerful young man. His life had been

steady and regular. He had been an excellent servant, and was a great favourite with his master and mistress. He had excellent health ; but inflammation seized him. He was ill six days, and now his soul is before God.

To-day is Monday. It was only on Friday morning that I heard of his illness, and of course before the day closed I visited him. On that day and on Saturday, he seemed to take very little interest in what I said to him. Oh that I had pressed the subject more, that I had been even more importunate with him ! On Saturday there was some apprehension of danger, but I was requested not to tell him, as the medical man feared that it might have an unfavourable effect upon the disease. I remonstrated, but to no purpose ; and I left a message that I hoped the medical man, who was expected that evening again, would tell him.

On Sunday I walked round to see him after my services, and found him better. There was hope that he would recover. There was a change also in his manner. He wished to know where the verses I had read to him were to be found ; he joined heartily in the prayers I offered up ; dwelt especially on one verse I had read, " If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature ; old things are passed away ; behold, all things are become new ;" and heartily said " amen " to the petition that he might become such a new creature.

You will not wonder that I now dwell on these things. The end was close at hand, closer than I then thought ; for this, of which I am speaking, was only yesterday, and I am writing in the early morning of Monday. I had intended to see him by nine o'clock to-day, but I was to see him before that time. This

morning at early dawn I was awoken by a request to go and see poor Henry. I at once feared the worst. I arose, and in a very few moments was on my way to the farm. The village was quiet, its inhabitants for the most part being wrapped in slumber. The busy smith, the stroke of whose hammer early and late has often been a reproach to me, was not astir. The birds were awake and glad in the early March morning. What a walk it was! how solemn, how prayerful! How weak I felt and ignorant! how completely dependent upon God's Spirit!

Arrived at the house, all the usual signs of sickness and watching are apparent at once. Henry I learn is much worse; they are applying a blister, and I must wait a few moments. In the interval, I call in the master and the fellow-servant of the dying man, that we may pray for him. As we rise from our knees, Henry's uncle, who had arrived last night, enters the room; he has been trying, he says, to arrange about his temporal affairs, but can get no definite answer. He thinks that Henry will tell me his wishes. Will I try? I refuse. I have other matters, I say, more important to attend to. They have had all night to arrange about the few clothes, the watch, and arrears of wages; I may have only a few minutes to speak about the soul. Then I ask, Has any one told him his danger since the unfavourable change took place? Can it be believed, he has not yet been told? "O God, and he so near thy judgment!" I go up stairs; he knows me, and grasps my hand. Tenderly I tell him that he cannot live. My heart is full. I beseech him to give me all his attention. He takes some ice to cool his

mouth, that he may better attend to me; and then he is "ready." Ready! with that poor weak body, with that fevered brain, with that wandering attention. Is this a condition in which to transact the business of eternity? But he is "ready." Every moment is precious. His mind may wander again directly.

"Henry," I remark to him, "I want you just to think of two things—your sin and your Saviour; put all else away except just those two things. Your sin great—in thought, word, and deed. Conscience will tell you. Try to recollect. You have been sinning since you knew right from wrong; you have forgotten God, refused his invitations, often transgressed against him; your sins in his sight cry against you for judgment; they are a fearful load, and will press you down to hell."

Here was a sermon, upon the receiving of which (humanly speaking) depended his soul's salvation; and yet it had to be compressed into two or three minutes, and this great truth of man's sin to be stated in a few broken words!

And then the Saviour ready to save him—dying to save the lost—willing to receive all who come to him—a perfect, all-powerful, loving Saviour, blotting out as a thick cloud transgressions. Oh! what a message is this to take to a dying man! What other message could suit such a one than that, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved?"*

How thankful we are at such times for the blessed truth of the salvation of the penitent thief—for the type of the brazen serpent—for those words, "Though your

* Acts xvi. 31.

sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow ; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”* He repents those words, and seems to grasp at them as suited to his case. He takes hold thankfully of the hymn, “ Rock of ages, cleft for me,” and repeats it after me. “ Do you repent of your sins, Henry ?” “ I do.” “ Do you believe that Jesus takes your sins away ?” “ I do.” Oh ! how the minister’s soul clings to a straw in such a case. My reason and experience confess these expressions at such a time to be but straws ; and yet I cling to them. They are all that I have.

Then the poor fevered brain wanders again. He rises up, and then throws himself down upon his pillow, crying, “ It is all darkness.” Poor soul ! What is it that is darkness ? Is it that the windows of the body are growing dim and dark ? Or is it that the soul is looking out upon the vast ocean of futurity, and can see nothing but thick darkness and a horrible tempest ? Oh ! how thick and murky dark it must be at such an hour to every soul that has not the eye of faith, to see Jesus, and the pearly gates of the heavenly Jerusalem to which he is conducting it ! “ It is all darkness,” he cried, as he threw himself down on his pillow. He never stirred again.

By his side I sit, holding his hand in mine, speaking to him though he does not answer, pointing out the way to that poor blind soul, knowing not what the soul is about, or what consciousness there still may be. But still pointing to Christ, the only refuge, seeking to show the way, which is so narrow, and to make it plain and easy, if I may, to this poor soul after whom the

* Isaiah i. 18.

avenger of blood is fast pressing. Is the soul hasting? Does it see the way? Is it faintly pressing on? Is it received within the refuge? Is it safe? Is it acting faith on Christ now, while the body is too weak to express it? I cannot tell. He does not answer my questions.

Still I continue. Text after text, slowly, solemnly, prayerfully, crying for help, I repeat; and then, "Do you hear me, Henry?" After an interval, faintly comes the answer, "I hear." He hears; I thank God. The word of God is powerful—that is my hope, even against hope. Again the precious words of Scripture; again questions: but no answer. The soul is looking closely at eternity now; no leisure to attend to me—no strength; the senses no longer do their office. Still, for the life's sake, I continue repeating the words of God—a lucid moment may return.

Then we kneel and commend him to God, and cry aloud for him, pleading the merits of the sinner's Saviour.

We rise, and I bid the uncle take my place. The eyes are fixed; there is no pulse. "It is all over," said the uncle. He has passed away without a struggle.

"All over;" far from it; rather *all begun*. New scenes are opening now upon that soul which has just escaped so silently from the body. What scenes they are, whether light or dark, whether full of joy or agony, I cannot tell. What messengers came to take him hence—whether the ministers of God's awful justice, or the angels of mercy—I know not. I only know that the soul which has just escaped from that body, lying before me, is now gone before God, to render its account of

the deeds done in the body. Did it close by faith with Christ's offer of mercy before it left the body? That is the question now—a question which cannot be answered till I myself stand before the same great throne.

All is not over; a larger, longer life has begun, which can never end. Is it, for this soul, *truly life*, even life eternal? Or is it that living death, "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched?" Reader, may these thoughts sink into your heart and mine. We may be nearer death and judgment than we think we are. The veil that separates time from eternity is very thin, and we may break through it when we least expect it. The moment we do so, a wondrous light will be thrown on all the things of time. How different will they seem to us to what they seem now! Even the minister does not truly realize the vast importance of his work, or the worth of the soul. But the moment we break through that thin veil, we shall see and know it all. Then, if you be not in Christ, what misery will await you—what remorse! How you will hate yourself for throwing away eternal joys, and for laying up for yourself a treasury of wrath which shall never be exhausted.

Don't put off repentance and turning to God. You are not stronger than Henry D—. Your life is not more secure. Your sickness may be as short as his; nay, your death may come more suddenly. Even if, on your death-bed, you profess repentance and conversion, how untrustworthy these professions are at such a time! What hope will your friends be able to entertain? What reasonable hope have I of my poor parishioner?

But the bodily life is over, and I turn to leave the room. "Be ye also ready," are my words, "for at such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." Going down-stairs, I see in the kitchen the companion of this poor man; I tell him that he is gone, and I beseech him to give his heart to Christ. "I will," he said, sobbing. Will he? It must be my part often to remind him of his promise and of his feelings at that time.

And now I pass out into the open air. It is still early; but what a solemn scene has this day already witnessed! The men are going to their work. The world does not stop, though a soul has just departed. How true it is, that in the midst of death we are in life, as well as that "in the midst of life we are in death." The activity, the common work, for the moment jars upon my feelings. I speak to the men as I pass. I tell them that the soul is flown. I press upon them the concerns of eternity; and then I come home to pray for myself and for those that remain, and to make this record, that I may be stirred up and reminded in time to come. And may the Holy Spirit impress on every reader the solemn warning of the Saviour's words, "Be ye also ready!"