



Rev. Wheeler and all the others were completely nonplussed by this unexpected reply. Sister Gooding had always been a liberal giver of time and money to all church work, and this was the first occasion she had ever been known to refuse to subscribe to any kind of church fund.

"Sister Gooding, you surely do not mean that. You must not mean it. I am at a loss to understand you."

"I do mean it, Brother Wheeler," she said, in her calm, quiet way, "and I will explain why: I am a firm believer in the church, and in its influence for good, and I have always attempted to advance its cause. I have made an effort to give something toward furthering every good work, and I would do the same to-day in this effort you are making, did I not feel that there is another purpose to which I can devote my small means more conscientiously. In the west there are thousands of people suffering for bread, and I conceive it my duty to give to them what I have to spare. Charity, it is said, begins at home, and I think charity and Christian duty are not far separated. I believe it my duty to look first after the suffering of our own land—to feed the hungry and clothe the naked—and take care of the heathen next. This is my opinion, and I do not set it up as a guidance to others. I merely propose to follow it myself, and the little I have to give shall go toward alleviating the sufferings of the starving settlers on the western prairie."

"This proved a very bomb to the meeting. The smile of self-satisfaction set on every face gave way to a look of astonishment, and the members looked inquiringly at each other. But on no one did it have such effect as upon Blatchford. Instantly he remembered that many of those poor settlers were suffering from the effects of his 'long time and easy term' loans and his swindling boom scheme at Paradise Park, and for a little while his conscience pricked him. A thought of his daughter, too, flashed through his mind, and for an instant he wondered if she might not be one of those who were starving—one whose ground down by another, even as hundreds were ground down by him. He never dreamed that she could be one of his own victims. He began to feel a sense of shame and dread, and even a slight twinge of regret, but the ever alert Sarah saw how his mind was drifting, and thought fit to recall it, which she did by saying:

"The poor have always with us, Sister Gooding, and I am sure we are all ever willing to aid the needy. But what are the wants of the body as compared with the welfare of the immortal soul? Besides, there are public charities for the poor of our own land, and the government will see that nobody starves. We must not let trifles like this influence us from our duty as Christians. We are engaged in a good work and we must not turn aside from it."

"So be it, Sister Blatchford," said Rev. Wheeler. "You speak with the spirit and the understanding. We are fishers for souls, and not feeders of the body. We have a higher and a mightier mission than that of catering to the appetite of the physical man. Our duty calls us above such."

After a little further conversation of this kind in which each tried to convince himself or herself that he or she was walking in the "narrow way," the meeting at last broke up and Blatchford and his wife were left alone in the parlor, where for some time they remained silent. Finally Blatchford spoke. He said:

"The words of that woman have disturbed me, Sarah, and I feel that I am to a great extent responsible for the sufferings of all those poor people out there in Kansas. I might have been more lenient with them and saved them the loss of so much money in that Paradise Park boom. Suppose Mary should be suffering at some other person's hands what my victims are suffering at mine?"

"Now, Hiram," said Sarah, "that is just your way. You allow your heart and feelings to accuse you of some great wrong, when you know you are not guilty of any. As a business man you have only done what you ought to do, and you have been a benefactor to those poor people. You have let them have money when they could not have gotten it anywhere else, and that was a great accommodation, I'm sure. You are not responsible for the seasons and the failures of crops, and all that, and you have no right to let your generous heart accuse you. You are too conscientious, Hiram, for a business man—that you are."

These words had the effect on Hiram that the wily Sarah knew they would, and instantly he began to feel quite fond of himself and would have liked to hug himself to his own bosom. For several weeks everything went along smoothly with him, and every day he felt more and more in love with his charitable qualities and his Christian virtues. Hiram Blatchford was not a man to give way to any insignificant feeling,

worse than a fool to turn your home into an asylum for these Pickles while your own child is an outcast in the world, without friends or money. I tell you, Hiram Blatchford, you haven't got as much religion as a huzzard, and you haven't got as much heart as a stone."

"Why—why, Mitchell," Hiram stammered, having recovered a little from his astonishment. "Don't 'why' me, Hiram," Aunt Mitchell went on. "I know what I'm talking about, and you know I do. The idea of your giving money to convert the heathen and paint the church and all that sort of thing, when your own child may be starving for food. It's a shame and a mockery, and I wonder that God don't damn you for it. The idea of you helping to convert the heathen! It's ridiculous. There is a wild nigger in Africa that in any more heathenish toward his offspring than you are toward yours, then I say God pity him! Oh you may wince, Hiram, but you

and he did not allow conscience to deter him for any great length of time. He at one time felt that he hadn't always done just right, but he managed to shift the blame of his wrong actions to some other person's shoulders, and succeeded, to his own satisfaction, in exonerating himself completely.

But another bombshell was destined to fall in the Blatchford camp, and it fell with terrible effect. This bombshell came in the shape of an elderly maiden lady known as Miss Mitchell Blatchford, sister to Hiram, who for some years had lived entirely isolated from her brother. She decided to pay Hiram a visit, and, accordingly, one day some weeks after the Christian aid society meeting she alighted at Hiram's door.

Hiram was not particularly glad to see his sister, for to tell the truth she had an uncomfortable way of speaking her mind that Hiram did not like. He distinctly remembered several occasions when she had freely spent her opinion of him and his way of doing, and she had not always considered him in the light of an injured innocent. He knew that she would soon discover the relation existing between himself and his daughter, and he felt morally certain that her sympathies would be with the latter, and that a "blowing up" for him would be the result.

Sarah was not glad to see Miss Blatchford either; and she not only shared in Hiram's feelings, but she was inclined to look upon any of his people as interlopers when they presumed to visit the house that ought to be sacred to the Spicklers. She feared, moreover, that this strong-minded woman would jar on her nerves, for she had missed her husband from how Miss Mitchell seemed to give vent, in no mean terms, to her honest opinions. Sarah felt that she was a good, saintly creature; yet she was not anxious that anyone should speak the truth about her in her presence. If she could have had her desire in the matter, she would have had Miss Mitchell's visit postponed indefinitely.

Of course Hiram and Sarah made an effort to welcome her, but the effort was very much constrained, and was lacking in warmth and feeling. Miss Mitchell either did not notice this, or ignored it for reasons of her own, and proceeded to make herself at home in her brother's house after her own peculiar fashion.

Miss Mitchell, as she was usually called by those who knew her well, was of a cold, taciturn disposition. She was distant and unsocial toward those who were her best friends, and toward strangers, or those whom she disliked, she was frigid to the last degree. She had a knack of forming a pretty correct estimate of people on first sight, and her first-formed opinion of Mrs. Blatchford was anything but flattering to that lady's Christian character. Mr. Blatchford attempted to make up to her erratic sister-in-law, but on each occasion met with such a cold repulse that she soon gave up the effort.

Aunt Mitchell preserved a quiet, cold dignity in her deportment to her brother and his wife, and avoided their society as much as possible. When she was forced into their presence, however, she maintained the bearing of one who is making a strong effort to hold herself in check. By her constrained manner, she not only succeeded in making an icy atmosphere in the house, but she caused the household to feel uncomfortable, and gave Hiram a spell of nervous fits. Every one felt that she would not keep up this rigid deportment for many days, and they were assured that when she did break loose there would be a terrible explosion.

Thus for a week Aunt Mitchell kept the family on the needles of suspense. Mrs. Blatchford grew so nervous in the meantime that every unusual noise caused her heart to cease beating. Blatchford worked himself up to such a point of uneasiness that he stood in momentary dread of some great misfortune. As for old Mrs. Spickler, Aunt Mitchell knocked her clear out of the ring at first sight. The icy bow and the piercing look she gave that old lady on the occasion of their introduction was sufficient to terrorize her for all time to come. Mrs. Spickler was the possessor of considerable spirit, and many people had quailed before her gaze, but she was not equal to Aunt Mitchell's cutting glance. She tried to avoid Aunt Mitchell's eyes after that first meeting, and if by chance she did catch a glance from them she wilted and shrank until she felt that she was but an atom of humanity—a mere speck of flesh and blood.

One morning the Blatchford household were assembled at breakfast, when Aunt Mitchell came in a little late. A glance at her face as she coldly nodded her salutation was enough to reveal the fact that her feelings were struggling vehemently to break loose. She sat down to the table with a snap, and putting herself in the most rigid attitude, preserved a perfect silence. Blatchford was detailing to his wife the particulars of a plan for the repainting and repairing of the church.

"It can be done for a hundred dollars," he said, "and that amount can be easily raised."

"I should think so," replied Sarah. "You will give something, I know."

"Yes, I have already subscribed twenty-five dollars. Ten for myself, ten for you and five for mother."

Aunt Mitchell said nothing just then, but the corners of her mouth began to twitch and she jabbed her fork into the food viciously. Two or three minutes passed in perfect silence, then Aunt Mitchell laid her knife and fork down, drew a long breath, and said:

"Hiram, you're a fool."

The bomb had been discharged, and its effect was wonderful. Hiram sat with his knife and fork in hand, and with his mouth and eyes open, transfixed. Sarah turned all sorts of colors and trembled all over. Mrs. Spickler felt herself diminishing so rapidly that she thought sure she would disappear altogether in a little while.

"Hiram, you're a fool," Aunt Mitchell repeated after giving a contemptuous glance around. "You're a fool and worse. You're a fool to think that you have got any religion. You're a fool to be led by the nose, and you're

to distract him and add to his self-accusations. At last, finding that it was impossible to control his wandering thoughts and fix them where he wished, and being unable to longer endure the thoughts his fancy bred, he threw down his papers and pen and fled from the office. He walked madly down the street, having no idea of his destination, having no care for his course, intent on but one thing, and that was to escape the thoughts that haunted him. On and on he walked until he passed through the town and out into the country, nor did he halt until he came to the river bank. Then he sat down, and removing his hat felt his burning, throbbing brow.

"My God, my God," he murmured, "what have I done! My poor, lost child, how could I ever forget you so! How have I forgotten your mother and my promise to her. Oh, God, spare me and let me live to undo what I have done. Let me but see my child once more and receive her forgiveness for all of my neglect and cruelty."

A long time he sat there gazing down into the deep flowing water, and more than once he was inclined to throw himself into the current and find relief at once for his tortured soul. There, he thought, he could escape the awful thoughts that haunted him, and he fancied that the cold water would be welcome to his burning brow. But finally the desire to see his daughter once more and atone to her for his cruel neglect got the better of him, and he arose and went toward his office.

As he walked unsteadily back he wondered why people stare at him so, little dreaming that a change of a few hours of mental anguish had worked in his outward appearance. He did not know that his face had become haggard, and his eyes bloodshot. He did not realize that the fires of hell that burned within him had scorched and seamed him outwardly.

He was nearing his office when he met Rev. Wheeler, and that gentleman instantly noted the great change in his valued parishioner, and immediately sought to assist Brother Blatchford home. He approached to take the old man's arm, but Blatchford waved him off, and almost fled from the spot. His action surprised Rev. Wheeler beyond anything, and he left that gentleman perfectly dumfounded. Rev. Wheeler looked after the fleeing figure for an instant, undecided what to do, but finally he concluded to follow. After a chase of a couple of blocks he caught up with Blatchford.

"Brother," he said, "you are ill. Allow me to see you home."

"Don't touch me," Blatchford fairly shrieked as he glared viciously upon the minister. "Don't come near me. You helped to do it. Go away from me. My child is dying of want. I feel it. I know it. And you helped to lead me away from her and blind me to her rights and claims. Don't speak to me again. I want my poor, wronged child, and I'm going to find her."

Then, before the astonished minister could collect his scattered senses, the old man was gone. He passed around the corner and entered his office, where, sinking into a seat, he buried his face in his hands and wept.

"Oh, my God, my God," he groaned "what have I done? How cruel, how heartless have I acted toward my own flesh and blood—my only child. How blind and brutal I have been, and how bitter is the awakening to the enormity of my sin. Oh, for one sight of my child, one word of forgiveness from her lips. I must find her. I must search the country from end to end for her."

At that instant the door opened and a clerk came in. He approached the old man diffidently, for he could not help seeing the great change that had come over him. He laid a telegram on the desk and without a word withdrew.

"DON'T COME NEAR ME!" Blatchford opened the telegram at once and read:

"Come immediately. Do not delay under any circumstances. The most important matter of your life. Come quick. SCRAGGS."

The old man sprang to his feet in an instant, and rushed wildly out.

CHAPTER XXI. GREEN NEEDS MORE MONEY AND GETS IT. Louis thought it best to say nothing to her parents of Harry Pearson's proposal. She very naturally concluded that the matter was at an end, and knowing the anxiety that weighed on her father's mind already, she was loath to add anything to it. John had not forgotten Scrags' words, but after watching Pearson closely on the occasion of his visit, saw nothing to warrant him in adopting Scrags' idea. His deportment was always that of a perfect gentleman, and there was absolutely nothing in it to indicate any intentions, honorable or otherwise, relative to Louise.

Two weeks passed quietly away after Harry's proposal, and during the time he made several visits to Green's, always bringing with him some delicacies for the sick woman. He often expressed a wish to run to John more, but his old tactful and kind always accepted the wish for the deed.

Dr. Hascom made regular daily visits to his patient, but as yet the improvement in her condition was scarcely perceptible. The fever was losing its power, it is true, but it had had a long run, and her blood was burned up by it and she was weak and feeble.

"She is in a fair way to recover," the doctor announced; "but she is so near the verge of the grave that it would require but little to place her in it. She needs strength, and we must endeavor to build up her constitution. Good food is the thing she stands most in need of now—good, wholesome diet and plenty of it."

"Yes," said John, "but that, I fear, I shall not be able to give her. I have raised the last dollar that I can raise—mortgaged everything that I can mort-

gage, and now it is all gone, and there is not a morsel of food in the house. I don't know what in the name of God I am to do next. I cannot sit here and see my wife die of hunger, and I know of no way to prevent it. What am I to do, doctor? What can I do?"

"Green," replied the doctor, "if I could I'd help you. But I can't. I am working for nothing, for my patients have no money to pay me, and I have scarcely enough to live on. I haven't a dollar. If I had you should have a part of it. But I'll see if I can't manage in some way to raise some money for you. I don't know what success I'll have, and I can't encourage you to hope for anything. I can only try. It is not necessary for me to come and see the patient again for several days, but if I am so fortunate as to do anything for you I'll come at once."

"Thank you, doctor," said John fervently as he clasped the old doctor's hand. "You have already placed me under a world of obligations to you, and if I am never able to repay you, God will."

"Oh, never mind that, Green," the old man said, "never mind about that. We're all human beings, and I am no more than human in doing what I do. There's nothing in it but what anybody ought to do."

"Perhaps not," said John, "but it's what few do nevertheless. My heart is full, doctor, and I cannot express my feelings. But this I can say: You have done more for us than any other person on earth, and my heart, my thanks and my prayers are yours. You came to us a stranger, and you have been a source of light to us. You have stood by us like a brother, and you have saved the life of my dearest one. God bless you, doctor, God bless you."

John could say no more, for his feeling overmastered him, and he broke down completely. The old doctor was seriously disturbed, and for awhile he fidgeted about nervously. He was a modest man, and whatever good deeds he performed were performed solely for the good there was in them, and not for the sake of the praise they might bring him. He had acted the part of a friend to John Green and his wife simply because he felt it his duty.

"Green," he said, laying his hand on John's shoulder, "don't talk that way. Let's not make any fuss over trifling matters like that. I'm glad my efforts in this case have not been unavailing, and I hope your wife will soon be recovered. Now, see here, you must make an effort to get a little money, and I'll make an effort and between us I think we may be able to accomplish something. Continue my remedies according to directions, and if anything happens before I return, let me know."

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"Was your business with Mr. Scraggs very particular?" the clerk asked, when John recovered himself a little.

"Yes," said John, "it is a matter of great importance to me." And he stated the object of his visit and told something of the necessity that forced him to seek the loan.

"I wish you had come before Mr. Scraggs left," the clerk replied, "for I am sure he would have given you the assistance you want. But it is too late now. He has no money here that I can handle or I would take the liberty of making the advance. If you can get along for a few days, however, I am certain you can count on him for the future when he returns."

"If I can do no better I shall have to wait," John replied, as he left the office, "but God only knows how we are to keep the breath of life in us unless we have food."

John returned to his team to go home, but the thought of going back with no money or provisions was a great disappointment to him, and he could hardly make up his mind to it. He sat down by his wagon and gazed vacantly across the street at the display of goods in front of a grocery store.

"There is plenty over there," he thought, "to keep off suffering, yet for the want of a few dollars I must go hungry while my wife dies of want. I cannot go back to my home empty-handed and sit down there to wait for starvation. There is food in the land and I must have it. God forgive me, but if I can steal some food I'll do it."

(Continued)

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