

UNOPENED PARCELS.



WO years! it sounds a long time to write of, but oh how soon it slips away when the little daily details of life go on uninterrupted by any startling joy or sorrow!

Yes; it was really two years before my father and I spoke again on the subject of our last conversation, and yet when we did, it came back upon me like a recollection of yesterday.

We had had a few more words about it the very next morning, it is true, but I do not call that conversation. I was running through the hall after lessons, with a flowerpot in one hand and a rake in the other, when the library-door opened, and my father's voice called me in.

I felt in a terrible hurry, and he saw it, but laid a hand on each of my shoulders to enforce attention.

"One moment, Honor," said he; "just this one! I have been half afraid that I puzzled you last night, and made you suppose I thought it almost better to have done wrong, if one only repented, than to have 'kept innocency.' Never as long as you live think that, my child. I never meant it."

"No, papa," was all I could answer.

"Only," he continued, "to human beings who are liable to sin every day of their lives it is a comfort unspeakable to believe that even *that* evil may be turned to good; that sin really repented of and borne in our minds as a warning may make us more specially watchful on that special point than we might otherwise have been. That is all, and it is a great deal, but I hope you did not think I meant more than that."

"Papa, I don't think I thought much about it at all afterwards," was my lucid reply to this appeal, as he has often since told me.

He said, "Quite right, Honor," at the time, and smiled, and bade me go and murder my bulbs as fast as I pleased. Whereupon I protested, and he went on to assure me that Lord Mayor's day, November 9, was the only proper day in the year for the setting of bulbs, and if I persisted in putting them in the ground several weeks earlier—well, he would not be answerable for the consequences.

Now papa was no gardener, as we all knew, and his giving his opinion at all about tulips and crocuses made me laugh. Besides, I couldn't think what the Lord Mayor's Show could have to do with our flowers, and said so. But when I rested my flowerpot on a chair to hear his answer, he would give no explanation of the how and the why, only repeated that it was so: he didn't know the inside of *all* the unopened parcels in the world, he said. On which I laughed again, and ran away to my garden and its easier thoughts.

Two years later grandmamma's parcel contained for me a copy of Longfellow's poems, and before many days were over I had come across his "Ladder of St. Augustine," and the old memories revived as fresh in my mind as a Californian rock rose in water:—the walnut, —the long evening with my father,—his warning the following day.

I ran down-stairs to my happy haunt the library, and rushed in regardless of ceremony. "Do you remember, papa?" I cried, proud to remember so well myself, and pointed triumphantly to the open page of the book—"there's something about it here, too," saying which I pushed the volume into his hand. He took it and read, and as he did so a strange feeling seized me of how near the distant past, of which I had not thought for so long, had come to the present. It was like having that other evening over again, only I was conscious of understanding so much better and caring so much more now. Certainly I had not grown into my teens without a change. But I sat on the same seat, in the same place, and the same voice spoke at my side:

"This is the true elixir of hope for poor weak humanity, Honor, if one could but administer it where it is needed. Men need to be saved from self-contempt as well as guilt, or they easily drop from fallibility to recklessness; and no argument could be so effectual as this—that sin repented of *may* be the stepping-stone to a more stable holiness than the untried innocence even of another Adam, were that to be had. *May* be is all I dare to say, remember. Whether it *shall* be rests with each individual himself. It is a great truth, and I wish I could spread faith in it to the four quarters of the globe—

'That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.'

And those are the words which state it most forcibly to my mind,

besides being intimately connected with a very interesting case which I should like to tell you about."

I edged my stool closer than ever to my father, and he began :

"When I was a boy at school my life was saved by a lad a year older than myself, and far out of reach of my acquaintance in school. A party of us were out bathing, and I had sillily struck out beyond our appointed bounds—to peep round a rock or some such nonsense—when an unexpected current carried me away. I battled against it as long as I could alone, for I was ashamed to call for help; but presently cramp seized me, and then, as you may suppose, I shouted pretty lustily. No one had noticed my disappearance, and they had some difficulty at first in finding out where the cry came from; but at last the lad I speak of saw me, and swam at once to my rescue. Before he could reach me I was almost exhausted, and yet there is no image more vividly pictured on my brain even now than that of his face as I saw it in that supreme moment when the sound of his breath was in my ears and I felt his strong arm stretched out to save me. Of what followed I know nothing, but I was told afterwards that it was fortunate for us both that he was unusually powerful; that otherwise our chances of life would have been small.]

"It will not surprise *you*, I dare say, Honor," continued my father, "to hear that after this adventure I was taken with a fit of hero-worship for my preserver. Such attacks—*engouements* the French call them—are not so common among schoolboys as young ladies. Still even schoolboys are not all formed internally to one model, however rigidly they may conform to a style in externals, and my hero-worship was, I assure you, as ardent as any girl's could be. In my eyes its object was the personification of everything great and noble, both in mind and body, and there was foundation enough for the faith in fact to prevent the charm ever being broken by any rude shock of disappointment. Everybody, as well as myself, thought him a fine fellow, and respected him. With how good reason you may suppose, when I tell you *they do so still.*"

My father paused, and I half jumped from my seat in surprise. Then he was alive; wouldn't papa tell me who it was; did I know him? &c. I begged very hard, but in vain, and my father continued his account.

"You have heard enough of schools, Honor, to know that whatever

feelings of this, I suppose, *romantic* character I entertained, I had to keep to myself. Anything like friendly intercourse with *him* was out of the question. His only reception of my stammered thanks the day after the accident was: 'Don't be such a little fool again,' accompanied by a grim smile as he turned on his heel. All this was *en règle*, and I knew it, but not the less did I think and sometimes dream of the powerful face with the anxious, earnest eyes as I had seen them in my extremity above that terrible water. . . . Nay, one day I was punished by a heavy box on the ear from a friend of my hero, for the presumption of having attempted certain sketches of his face on the backs of some exercises. And if unintentional caricaturing deserved punishment I was rightly served.

"By-and-by invitations came to him from my father and mother, which one day he accepted; but though, while a visitor among us, the courtesies due from a visitor to his host's family went on in the usual way, our relations on our return to school resumed their old footing. He was unusually forward, I backward, beyond what I ought to have been. The gulf was very wide between us as my father told me when he parted from me, adding with his last kiss the warning assurance, 'If you want that boy's friendship you will have to deserve it.' And, to cut a long story short, this was what I tried for; and I was so far successful that a day came when my hero and I were associates and I may say *friends*.

"By that time though—mournful to relate—the *engouement* had so far subsided into rational appreciation that I would no longer have sworn black was white because he said it. So you see I was turning fast into an old fogie. And now that we came into closer contact there was one thing in my hero that puzzled me. Occasionally his thoughts seemed to drift away out of the range of anything or anybody present, and a painful, anxious look came into his eyes, which always reminded me of his face as I saw it on the water. Before I knew him I had noticed this mood, and attributed it to his brain being fixed on some profound and weighty subject of thought. Now it struck me differently. Now I fancied there was some trouble at work within; but there was a reasonable clue to this, perhaps, in the fact that his mother was a widow left with a large young family to guide and see provided for.

"The fit of abstraction always passed over quickly, and as unexpectedly as it had come on, and if one asked in what dreamland he

had been wandering for the last few minutes, a smile or a joke turned aside the inquiry. It is a trifle to mention, but it acted as an effectual, though slight, bar to complete intimacy; and when I joined him at college a year after he had left me at school, the same odd little bit of reserve remained. The old joke, 'A penny for your thoughts,' brought a frown instead of a smile to his face on those occasions. At the University I found my hero utterly unchanged, except as regarded advance of mind. The delicate high-mindedness and scrupulous truthfulness (not over-common qualities in boy or man) which had been the subject of my profound admiration at school, were equally strongly marked now. They commanded the same respect from old and young.

"And now comes the kernel of my story, Honor," observed my father, who evidently began to think I must be tired of hearing of his model of perfection. "All I have said hitherto was to interest you in the individual. You could not otherwise have cared for what is coming.

"It was the year that 'In Memoriam' came out, and the volume was in the hands of most thinking young men, but, oddly enough, I came across it before my friend did, for it was sent to me during the time I was at school without him, and I had been completely carried away in wonder and admiration. Of course in reading anything so noble and great my first thought was of him who could appreciate it so thoroughly. Of course too, as I read, I fancied a strong resemblance between *my* hero and the subject of Tennyson's lament. Consequently, 'In Memoriam' was one of our first themes of conversation after we met again, and we agreed to go through it together.

"Some days in one's life seem to begin and end in gloom. I do not mean *grief*, but a sort of mental gloom, matching the cloudy day of the physical world on which nothing looks bright. On such days jestings, however innocent, feel out of place, and every train of thought, wherever begun, ends in seriousness. On such a day my friend and I sat down, late in the evening, to the study of 'In Memoriam,' he reading aloud by my request; my wish being to watch its effect upon his mind.

"And certainly the plan succeeded. At the very first line of the introductory poem, he stopped and hesitated.

'Strong Son of God, immortal Love——'

"Here he turned to me with an inquiring look.

“‘It is perfectly orthodox,’ I cried, and quoted the translation of an ancient hymn in which the same expression occurs. He nodded assent, smiling, and went on, never *hesitating* again, though he stopped many times to utter admiration or better understand the sense, which often required careful re-reading.

“One’s brain was warm in those days,” continued my father, “and by the time we had ended and discussed the introductory poem, an hour had elapsed, and we were both worked up to a high state of mental excitement.

“Then we went on, he reading as before :

‘I hold it truth with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.’

When, what was my surprise to see my friend fling the book down, lay his arm on the table, and bury his face upon it! I called him by name and asked what was the matter.

“‘Do you believe it?’ said he.

“‘It? what?’ cried I, for I was too much bewildered about him to be thinking of the book.

“‘That men may rise through sinning, or something like it,’ he answered, gruffly. ‘A man may repent, of course, and that for a lifetime, and he may rise in spite of it; but it is always a dead weight drawing him back.’

“‘I differ with you,’ said I; ‘conceit—that is, self-esteem—is perhaps the widest spread of all the vices, and, like drunkenness, opens the door to a thousand others. Now suppose the consciousness of some weak point in one’s character, or even of some weak yielding to it wrongly, burnt humility into one’s heart, would not that be a rise? Besides, the having stumbled may make one keep one’s foot more diligently. God’s mercy is far beyond man’s conception of it. I believe the words fully.’

“‘I wish I could,’ said he, in a weary voice.

“‘And then a sudden thought struck me that my friend was troubled personally—that, blameless, exalted even, for a lad, as his life had been for years, some old recollection was rankling in his mind. I became composed myself at once.

“‘We read the Scriptures quite differently,’ I observed, quietly.

‘When it tells us scarlet sins shall be white as snow, I don’t expect a pink stain to remain. You do. I believe the truth of the assurance, though it is spoken metaphor-wise. You do not. I even choose to apply another text to the same subject. ‘Though ye have lien among the pots yet ye shall be as the wings of a dove that is covered with silver wings and her feathers like gold.’

“‘It won’t do,’ he murmured, moving his head uneasily, but not looking up.

“‘It will not do for you to call yourself my friend on these terms,’ cried I, warmly. ‘If you had committed murder I could understand it; but here for some trumpery nonsense like the mad Welshman’s baby sin in Lavengro you are shutting me out from confidence and yourself from comfort.’

“‘You don’t know that it is nonsense,’ said he.

“‘It is time I knew the truth,’ I answered.

“‘You would despise me as much as I despise myself,’ he objected.

“‘If you despise yourself,’ cried I, vehemently, and striking the table a heavy blow as I spoke, ‘you are guilty of a heinous sin.’

“‘What in the world do you mean?’ he asked; but at last he was looking up.

“‘I mean that it is downright sin not to be thankful to God for having been able to lead the life you have done for years past; restraining yourself, and setting an example the value of which will never be known to you till the day of judgment.’

“I broke down here, for I thought of the help it had been to myself.

“‘My dear friend!’ exclaimed he,—and then he broke down too. I had prevailed.

“And now, Honor,” resumed my father, “if you were to guess for a hundred years you could never guess what this trouble of my hero’s was. It was no laughing matter, and yet I know you will smile when I tell you that he had when a child deceived his family by pretending to see ghosts, and had never undeceived them up to that moment.”

“Oh, but *why*?” was my natural exclamation.

“Chiefly, because not having done it at the first right moment,” answered my father, “he delayed till he couldn’t endure to revert to the subject. Sometimes, as he told me, the whole affair seemed such a trifle as not to be worth speaking about, especially after every one else appeared to have forgotten it. At other times it felt to him too

dreadful to be spoken of at all! In short, although life went on as usual—and with all young people the enjoyment of life is so strong that it overrules reflection—my poor hero was, as it were, haunted by his own imaginary ghost.”

“But, papa, how *could* he do such a thing?” I asked.

“It arose thus,” began my father: “he was a nervous, imaginative child, and very restless at night; a very troublesome quality in a nursery, and one which was often getting him into scrapes. One night, not very long after his poor father’s death, he awoke in a confused, half-conscious condition as usual, and, as usual, began to cry. As usual, too, came the nurses’ remonstrance and orders to be quiet and go to sleep; but these women were themselves the cause that they could not be obeyed. They had left the door which divided the nurseries a little bit open after they put him to bed, and through it he had seen their two heads—one young, one old—‘nodding together’ (vizier-like) over their candle on the work-table, as they sat mending socks, and chattering. Not planning weddings, however, but un- luckily telling half-fledged ghost stories of ‘warnings,’ ‘appearances,’ ‘knockings,’ and so forth; all in connection, of course, with ‘poor master’s death.’ That the child heard what they said very imperfectly did not mend matters. He fell asleep with the sounds of smothered exclamations in his ears. ‘Awful, ain’t it?’ ‘You don’t say so!’ ‘Makes me all of a shake,’ &c., his last sight being the glimmer of the candlelight on the younger girl’s wide-opened eyes, as she stared, respectfully astonished at the nonsense her old goose of a companion was talking.

“No wonder that from a sleep so begun, saddened, too, by the mention of his poor father, my poor friend awoke disturbed and apprehensive, and, staring into the half-darkness of early dawn, was ready to fancy anything that might suggest itself. Accordingly, when ordered to be quiet and go to sleep, he shrieked out, between his sobs, that *he couldn’t, for he saw something.*

“Then followed the fact—which, child as he was, he detected in an instant—that these words changed the whole tone of nurse’s behaviour. No more scolding now, but petting and coaxing. It was, ‘Oh, Master Tommy, dear’ (we will call him Tommy for the present), ‘don’t say *so*, please. There can’t be anything, you know; don’t fancy such things, there’s a good boy,’ &c. Nevertheless she hustled out of bed and

struck a light, which she carried triumphantly into every corner of the room to prove to him (and perhaps herself, too) that there really was nothing there.

“But the ‘good boy’ could not be pacified so easily. The night-terrors of children being the result of physical sensations, cannot often be reasoned away. He still *felt* disturbed, and cried accordingly, calling out now from time to time that he *saw something*. They had furnished this text themselves. Both nurses were up now, and at last one of them asked ‘*What* he saw?’ and then came the unhappy answer (also suggested by their chatter) that *he saw papa*.

“The noise had by this time awakened one of the other children, and a little half-roused girl was told confidentially by the younger nurse that ‘Master Tommy had seen his poor dear papa, and it would break missus’s heart.’ ‘Poor dear papa!’ was all the child answered at the time, for she dropped asleep again at once; but the next morning Tommy found himself installed in all the privileges and prestige of a *ghost-seer*, though the fact was only spoken of in whispers in the nursery, for little Missy was warned she would make her mamma quite ill if she said one word to her about it.

“This was the beginning of the evil, Honor,” continued my father. “Do not expect me to account for its continuance, only observe how easy it is to get *entangled* in wrong-doing. He might have forgotten the night adventure, perhaps, but the honour of having seen a ghost being thrust upon him by nurse, and he not disclaiming it at once—in point of fact accepted it. After which retreat was difficult. He invented no particulars, and never talked about it, it is true, but he never denied it. When his little sister (who had her misgivings) inquired if he had really seen anything, and what—his one answer was that ‘he had seen papa.’ It was the only account he ever gave.

“Thus weeks passed over, and as the child did not fall ill and die, as the nurses expected, the affair of the ghost-seeing was almost forgotten, and nursery discipline going on as before, when suddenly the scene was repeated. Again a restless sleep, again an agitated waking, and again Master Tommy *saw something*. Only on this occasion the disturbance happened before the family were in bed, and the child having got up and rushed into the front nursery screaming after his papa, the noise brought his mother to the door.

“This was the moment,” continued my father, “for which my

friend could never forgive himself. He allowed his mother to be deceived!

“The mere sight of her face, he assured me, woke him, young as he was, to a sense that he *was* acting deceitfully, which he had never fully realized before. He could never have said the thing to her, he added. Nevertheless, when nurse came forward and gave her version of all ‘the poor dear child’ had seen and said, he stood by helplessly sobbing till his mother folded him in her arms and consoled him: and so the evil went on. . . .

“There! that is the worst!” cried my father, interrupting himself here, and returning the rather vehement hand-squeeze with which I expressed my indignation at his hero’s behaviour. “Now you know how he became a make-believe ghost-seer, Honor. Condemn the offence as much as you please, but let us have no inhuman human judgments upon the offender. Only the One to whom all hearts are open can judge of individual guilt, because He only can measure the amount of conscious responsibility. Who can guess at it even in the case of a child?” I relaxed my hold on my father’s hand here, and stooped to kiss it in silent apology for the unspoken judgment my heart had pronounced. “Looking back upon the past with the self-reproach of a later intelligence,” continued my father, “my friend took a terrible estimate of his early transgression; one that would have satisfied even *you*, Honor. Let that suffice. Our interest in the matter is to know what followed—what effect was left upon his mind. Hundreds of well-meaning people in the world, I know would tell you that there could be but one answer to such a question; that he *must* have turned out ill. What happened really? A few more years, better health—continued Christian training—fitting companionship—turned a puny baby into a strong boy, sound in body as in mind: what came then of the one dark corner in his heart? Because he had been deceitful once, and had not even yet the courage to own it, was he therefore to go on being deceitful more and more? Was the evil to spread like a leprosy over his whole nature? Quite otherwise; quite the reverse even! If his mother had been asked which, of all her children, was, during the years of his intelligent boyhood, the *most* conscientious, the *most* ready to confess a fault, the one whose word could be *most* implicitly relied upon, she would have named him we have called ‘Tommy,’ the little rascally ghost-seer of the nursery. ‘And I hated

myself for being such a hypocrite,' exclaimed my poor friend, after telling me that such was his mother's conviction. Can you guess my answer, Honor? you ought almost to be able," said my father. "I told him that what he called *hypocrisy* was *repentance*—the truest of all repentance—not a mere expression of regret, but an entire change of mind—such an actual dislike of the old infirmity that the faintest approach to it had become detestable. How a man of his reasoning powers had missed recognizing the commonplace truths he now heard from me as a hitherto undiscovered consolation, I cannot imagine. Perhaps justice was better satisfied—perhaps his character was ripened more effectually—by the pain he went through: pain and annoyance too. Imagine him, for instance, with his keenly-awakened sensitiveness, exposed to being reminded, sometimes jestingly, sometimes seriously, by his brothers and sisters, of the abhorred hoax as if it had been truth! The very mention of the word 'ghosts,' he assured me, filled him with horror in those days, living in dread as he did of some personal allusion. 'By-the-by, Tommy, *you're* the one to tell us all about ghosts. I wonder why yours has left off coming,' &c. His only resource, and it was a miserable one, was to turn angry, and bid them not talk nonsense. In this way he did succeed at last in checking these allusions, but it was pain and grief to him, a burden upon his spirit, young and happy as he was otherwise. Yet, by God's grace, he rose instead of sinking under it, though he suffered what I should be sorry to hear of any one dear to me suffering again. St. Augustine's ladder is a hard one to climb by, Honor. Thrice happy those to whom the steps are not so steep as they were to my dear friend! The great fact remains, however, that *up them* he reached a scrupulousness of conscience he *might* not have aimed at but for the hateful sense of the infirmity by which he had once fallen.

"The oddest thing [of all," pursued my father, "was, that up to almost the last moment of giving me this account my hero was perfectly unconscious of *this* part of the lesson it taught. I literally had to 'point the moral and adorn the tale' myself by asserting its glorious confirmation of those words of Tennyson, which he had begun by disputing! Nor can I ever forget the triumphant delight with which I first saw his old view of himself waver and fall.

"'But how am I to shake off the black dog who *will* jump on my back when I think of it?' he objected.

“ ‘Turn him a beautiful sky-blue,’ cried I (alluding to a story of a witty child who said he had done so when he recovered his temper), ‘by *telling your mother.*’ His countenance fell for one brief moment. ‘What *will* she think of me? That’s dreadful.’ ‘What do *I* think of you,’ cried I, ‘who am only your friend?’ The argument was unanswerable, and when that was settled, and I had boldly told him he stood before me a living example of what Tennyson had proclaimed to all the world as a truth *he* believed in, my hero was convinced: a fact I discovered most conclusively by his turning the tables on me and pretending to be amused at my eagerness. And then there broke over his face that happy smile, the like of which I never saw on human face but his——”

“You forget Uncle Frederick’s, papa,” said I here, interrupting him.

“No,” replied my father, “I do not. It is your Uncle Frederick I am thinking of at this moment. My dear friend and your dear uncle are one and the same person.”

I almost shrieked with amazement.

“And it was Uncle Frederick who saved you from drowning, and married your sister?” I asked.

My father assented by a nod.

“And was that the way he became a great man?” I asked next.

“By marrying my sister?” inquired my father, smiling.

“No, papa: by fighting so hard to be honest and true, I meant.”

“I shall say ‘Yes’ to that, Honor,” was my father’s reply, “let the world say what it will; for he could not have been a great man otherwise. Clever men without honesty are charlatans, and are sure to break down in some way or other at last. It is a glorious thing—far past all other glories in this world—to be trustworthy in every word and action of your life, child!”

We were silent for a few moments then.

“It’s quite a romance,” was my conclusion.

“And something more,” put in my father. “Every true story of humanity has a moral wrapped up in it, whether people care to extract it or not. If the good people are made happy at last, we are encouraged to follow their example. If they suffer wrongfully with patience, they add so many more to the hosts of witnesses who, ‘for the joy set before them,’ have ‘despised’ earthly shame and sorrow. Now, Honor, open this parcel of mine, and tell me what is to be

seen inside it. What do *you* think my story of Uncle Frederick teaches?"

I thought about it a few minutes, and then blundered out my ideas.

"Well, of course to begin with, it teaches what Mr. Tennyson says, you know, papa—'That men,' and all that; because Uncle Frederick turned his—if you please, let me call it fault—he was so *very* little!—into a ladder of St. Augustine."

Papa made no reply, perhaps guessing from my voice that I had something else to say. But I could not say it where I was. I got up and, big as I was, slipped on his knee, put my arms round his neck, and whispered in his ear—

"And then I ought to try to do the same: and I intend, papa—I do indeed. When I am going to be very cross I shall try and remember how hot-tempered I have been, and that if I watch against it very hard, perhaps I may be actually good-tempered some day, and then I shall have got up by *my* ladder."

"By the grace of God you will," answered my father, as he returned my embrace. "And now we have got both moral and application to our story."

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"Just one thing more, papa," I whispered, a few minutes afterwards. "What did his mother say when he told her?"

"Oh, haven't I mentioned that?" cried my father. "She said, 'I have suspected as much for years. Now I know it. Kiss me, my darling.'"

"Then she was not angry a bit, papa?"

"How could she be, with such a son, Honor? That he was what he was, was enough for her—is always enough [for a parent. Out of which fact comes the 'larger hope,' that such love is but the adumbration of the love and mercy of the Father in heaven."

EDITOR.

