

Delaware College Review

VOL. 31

FEBRUARY, 1915

No. 5

"Thy Will, Not Mine, O Lord!"

THE old doctor came slowly down the stairs followed by a young woman dressed in black. During their descent, neither said a word; but their faces expressed their feelings. On the doctor's was written pity; on the woman's, intense agony. When they had reached the first floor, the old gentleman turned to the woman, and laid his hand on her shoulder. It was almost a minute before he spoke.

"You don't know how it hurts me to tell you this, Helen," he said. "Perhaps I shouldn't tell you now. Perhaps I should wait a little. But I think it's my duty. I don't see how Charlie can live through the night. I don't say he will not; but I think that he has no chance. His fever is too high. It's no use my telling you how sorry I am. You know I love you as a daughter, Helen. You must bear up. What God has given, God may take away."

Mrs. Fields bowed. The news seemed to stun her. The doctor put his hand on her head.

"You've had your share of trouble," he said. "God himself knows that,—first Frank, and now your boy. But you must be brave, you know; you must be brave. You—"

He tried to say more but couldn't. His voice almost broke. Before this

young woman all his professional assurance (Dr. Cartwright had never known professional indifference) vanished. He bent his head and touched her hair with his lips as a father might kiss a daughter. He grasped her hand hurriedly, opened the door, and was gone.

As soon as she realized that she was alone, Mrs. Fields lifted her head. She stood motionless as a statue. She was a woman of middle height with a subtle trim figure which expressed grace with girlishness and womanhood. Her face was not, perhaps, perfect; but no one could err in calling it beautiful. Intelligence was written in every feature, especially in her clear brown eyes and high forehead. Her hair was of a golden brown lying in wavy curls on her head.

She stood dry-eyed, gazing through the door into the sunny street. The sky above was a perfect blue; the birds sang in the trees. Some children were playing noisily, shouting from their bubbling-over happiness; but as soon as they saw her, they stopped their noise. The whole neighborhood knew that Charlie was sick. All the children had had careful injunctions from their mothers not to play near Fields' house. But children will forget. One little girl looked apprehensively at Mrs. Fields from under her long lashes, and the young

mother forced a smile, a sweet sad smile. The little tots passed on and Mrs. Fields was left alone again.

She stood by the door for perhaps fifteen minutes in a state of mental apathy. She was too much stunned to think. The revelation had not yet touched the reasoning soul. She merely forgot that she existed. Then suddenly the vision of a hot fevered face framed by golden hair lying on a white pillow flashed before her eyes, and with a little cry she rushed up the stairs and into the sick room.

In her haste she almost collided with a white-gowned nurse who was dropping medicine into a measuring glass; but the mother hardly paused. She walked quickly to the bed-side and gazed with passionate anguish at the little face on the pillow. She brushed back his curls with her hand and felt his forehead hot with the constant fever. She covered his faces with kisses and pressed the little body to her, forgetting, in her anguish, the fact that she might be injuring her treasure. The nurse gently drew her away.

"You are only harming him and yourself, Mrs. Fields," she said. "You must do your best to brace up."

The mother looked at her with dry, wild eyes.

"It's easy to say that," she said. "But you're not a mother!"

She sat on a chair next to the bed and thought. This great sorrow brought to her mind a train of griefs, in which joys, too, were intermingled in pitiable contrast. She thought of her graduation from college. How proud she had been! She thought of the first day she had met Frank, the night on which he had told

her that he loved her, and the day of her marriage. How happy they had been in the first year of their new life together! And, oh! what bliss she had felt on that day of days,—the greatest day of her young life,—the day on which Charlie was born. She thought of how much his coming had meant to Frank and her,—how he came to be the one, sufficient center of their lives. And then when Charlie was just five years old,—ten months ago, about,—Frank had died. She remembered only too well her agony and how her husband's death had made Charlie her all in all. And now he too was to go! Oh! God! It was beyond human endurance.

Charlie was only a normal little boy. He was full of mischief, continually getting into scrapes; but everyone around loved him, and she,—she worshipped him! She hadn't spoiled him, though, she thought. At least she had tried not to. She thought of his winning ways, his frank blue eyes when he laughed, and his red lips when he kissed so boyishly, so enthusiastically. Charlie die? No, she couldn't believe it! Surely Dr. Cartwright was mistaken. It couldn't be! She looked again at the feverish face. The horror of his dying struck her to the heart, and, falling on her knees on the floor with her head on the bed, she burst into passionat sobs.

Afterwards, when she tried to recall, she never could tell just how long she remained in that position. She lost count of time in the grip of her great grief. The first thing which she was consciously aware of, was a hand being laid on her shoulder. She looked up quickly and recognized young Mr. Dixon, the new

clergyman of her church. It immediately flashed in her mind that Dr. Cartwright had sent him; and she felt a kind of resentment at being thus intruded upon in her sorrow. The young minister did not give her time to speak.

"Dr. Cartwright told me, Mrs. Fields," he said, "of the terrible state of apprehension you were in, and I just dropped around to see if I could be of any service."

"It's very good of you, Mr. Dixon," she replied, "but I'm afraid you can't. I can do nothing but wait." Her eyes shone with tears. As a man, Mr. Dixon first noticed her beauty; then as a clergyman he pitied her.

"It's very hard, I know," he said. "But if it be God's will that your boy should die, we must accept His decision. He knows better than we do, you know. Perhaps the boy will not die."

"Oh! my God, if he did!" she gasped and again flung herself hysterically on the bed. The sobs came this time in dry, hard bursts. "Oh! why should this come to me?" she asked. "Why to me, —all this trouble? I never did anything to deserve it. There is no justice in the world.—Does God care?—He can't care or he wouldn't ruin my life thus.—I begin to believe there is no God!—No God would treat me like this!"

Mr. Dixon was about to reply to this incoherent outburst when Dr. Cartwright stepped into the room.

"I thought I'd take another look at the little fellow. Then I'll go home and get some supper, see a few patients, and come back again. I'd better stay all night, I think."

He went over to the bed and felt the

boy's pulse. The little chap was in a state of complete unconsciousness. Mrs. Fields watched him with agony in her eyes as the doctor put his hand on the child's hot forehead.

"Is there any chance?" she asked in the anguish of suspense. "Tell me, tell me!" she almost shrieked as she saw that the old man was going to make a dissembling statement. "Tell me! I must know!"

The doctor looked doubtfully at the clergyman who, in turn, looked at the floor.

"Tell me!" she gasped.

Dr. Cartwright walked toward the door.

"I can't say positively, Helen, any more than I could before; but I have no hope. I'll be back in an hour, dear." And he left.

No sooner had the word "hope" left the doctor's lips than the tortured mother fell on a couch near the bed, on which the nurse had been accustomed to sleep, and buried her head in the pillow.

Dr. Dixon scarcely knew what to say. His professional training had given him no insight into hysterical women. He began rather awkwardly;

"My dear Mrs. Fields, your son is in God's—"

The woman sprang up and looked at him in rage. Her face fairly glowed with intense emotion.

"God!" she said. "Don't speak to me of God. There is no God, or if there is, I hate him! In my college days I doubted; now I am sure. There is no God. No Being of infinite mercy would torture a poor soul as I am tortured. No

God would trample me as I trample a worm under foot. I—"

"Let us pray a little," said Mr. Dixon.

"Yes, I shall pray," shrieked the woman. "Hear me!" And standing upright, she cried with vehemence in her voice.

"Oh! Thou Absolute Force in the Universe, save my boy, save my boy—"

"If it be Thy will," interposed Dixon.

"No," she replied. "No! Thou *must* save him. He is my all in all. If he dies, I shall either disbelieve in Thee, or hate Thee for evermore!"

And she covered her face with her hands.

All that night the mother, the doctor, and the nurse watched unceasingly. The doctor, with an interest which showed his singular devotion to this young woman and her boy, never moved from the bed-side. At times he sat for hours with the child's wrist in his hand feeling the throbbing pulse which told the tale of life or death. The face of Mrs. Fields was a study for a Rembrandt. Say what they will about the supremacy of descriptions by the pen, only the brush of genius can show the agony of a mother watching the crisis of an only child. There were no tears now in Mrs. Fields' dark eyes, only a look of pitiable anguish as she gazed at the child's hot face.

The night was warm. No gas was burning, for the moonlight which came into the room gave all the light that was needed. At intervals the mother walked to the window and let the warm breeze blow on her face. She felt her Maker in the moon and stars above her, in the rustling leaves and the perfume of summer incense which was wafted from the

flowers. As she gazed at the pale regent of the skies, her heart became more peaceful and resigned; but as soon as she tiptoed back to the bedside and saw those fair curls and that unconscious face her rebellion returned four-fold.

Hour after hour passed. The suspense grew terrible. Even the nurse, hardened much by her long professional experience, could not help but be sympathetically affected by the anxiety of the old doctor and by the mother's agony. Dawn began to appear. Mrs. Fields watched as it came up from behind the hills. Oh! that it might mean a dawn of her son's life, not a dawn of his eternal rest!

She had thought once or twice when the doctor had looked very closely at Charlie's face that his own had brightened slightly. Perhaps she imagined it. She could not ask him. His denial would be more than she could bear.

The sun rose higher above the trees. All Nature began to waken. She sat near the window to get a breath of the fresh morning air after sitting beside the bed without moving for perhaps two hours. She was lost in despair. Why did not the doctor tell her the end was near? She could bear it now.

She did not hear the quiet steps behind her; but she felt the kind hand on her shoulder. She turned her face to his inquiringly.

"Helen, Charlie has a chance. I believe he'll live. In fact I'm almost sure he has passed the crisis. God be praised!"

She stared at him as though she didn't comprehend. The intelligence of it was beyond her wrought-up brain. But then

a light broke all over her face. She leaned her head on the window-stool and cried silently.

One summer evening, fifteen years after the miraculous recovery of Charlie, Mrs. Fields was sitting at the supper table expecting her boy to appear at any moment. The light from a table-lamp shone on her face showing a few wrinkles and gray hairs, but indicating without a doubt that her beauty was still extant. She looked a little worried, though, and when her son arrived soon after six and took his seat hurriedly, she looked at him anxiously from under her lashes. She saw that his handsome face was flushed slightly, it might have been from hurrying, but she doubted that.

The truth was that of late Charlie had been following the example set him by his sex ever since the time of the Prodigal Son and had been running about rather recklessly,—“sowing his wild oats,” in fact. His devoted mother had heard vague reports that he gambled (her kind, sympathetic neighbors had done their duty by allowing this to come to her ears), and she had seen many indications that he drank a little.

During all his boyhood, ever since the night when he had been fairly snatched from death, she had idolized him, worshipped him with all her soul. That she was spoiling him, she had been painfully aware; but he had never done anything really wrong and had asked for forgiveness so frankly,—his clear blue eyes used to look so penitent, that she had never been able to find it in her heart to punish him.

However, as he rose from boyhood, faults increased. He began keeping

company with boys scarcely his social equal. He went nearly through the high school and, although it was his mother's greatest wish that he should go through college, he disliked study so much that he never was graduated. Where he spent a great deal of his time, his mother never knew; but she surmised. Probably in poolrooms and perhaps in worse places! Once she had spoken to him; but the scene which had ensued had been so painful that she never remonstrated with him again. He would outgrow it, she thought. Besides, she was still under that delusion so common to most mothers,—a delusion naturally intensified in her case,—that her boy was different from other boys. Charlie could never do anything really wicked. He would soon see the error of his ways and reform.

Nevertheless, her anxiety about him grew. He seemed to be getting no better; indeed, he was growing worse. Gambling became a craze with him. He began to stay out until all hours of the night and morning. Sometimes he got only a few hours' sleep before starting for work. This Mrs. Fields knew only too well. How many times had she lain sleepless waiting for him to come home! And how many times had her hot tears fallen as she heard his unsteady footsteps going toward his room!

On this particular evening, after they had both eaten for a while without speaking, Mrs. Fields broke the silence.

“Can't you stay at home tonight, Charlie?” she asked. “I feel very nervous and not particularly well. I should like to have you with me. Not, of course, if you have any particular en-

