The man leered at Mr. Hardy, raised his arm as if to strike, while the manager confronted him with a stern look, but before he could do any harm two or three of the men seized him and hustled him back to the other end of the shops, while Burns rose, vowing vengeance.

The men went back to their machines, and Mr. Hardy, with an anxious feeling of heart, went back into the office, satisfied that there would be no trouble at the shops for the rest of the day at least. He felt sorry that he had been obliged to discharge Herman, but he felt that he had done the right thing. The company could not afford in any way to employ men who were drunkards, especially not just at this time, when it began to be more than plainly hinted that the result of the accident on the road was due to the partial intoxication of a track inspector.

That accident was a complication in Robert Hardy's seven days. It was demanding of him precious time that he longed to spend in his family. At one time in the afternoon as he worked at the office Mr. Hardy was tempted to resign his position and go home, come what might. But, to his credit be it said, even in his most selfish moments formerly he had been faithful to his duties at the office. At present no one could take his place at once. He felt that his duty to the company and to the public demanded his services at the time of a crisis in railroad matters.

So he staid and worked on, praying as he worked for his dear ones and hoping, as no bad news came from home, that Clara was better. He had been to the telephone several times and had two or three short talks with his wife, and now, as it began to grow dark in the office, just as the lights were turned on, the bell rang again, and Mrs. Hardy called him up to tell him that the minister, Mr. Jones, had called and wanted to see him about some of the families that were injured in the accident in the foundry room.

"Tell Mr. Jones I will try to see him at the meeting tonight." (In Barton the church meeting fell on Wednesday.) "And tell him I will have something to give him for what he wants. How is Clara now?"

"No change yet. Will is suffering some from nervousness. He says he had a horrible dream of the accident this afternoon. Bess is about the same. Her escape was a miracle."

"Has George come home yet?"

"No. I am getting anxious about him. I wish you would inquire about him at the Bramleys' as you come up to supper."

"I will. I must leave very soon. This has been a terrible day down here. God keep us. Goodby."

CHAPTER VIII.

Robert finished most of the work, toiling as never in all his life before, and started for home at 6. On the way he made inquiries concerning George, but nobody had seen him since the evening before. When he reached the house, he found that his wife, utterly worn out, had lain down for a little sleep, and Alice was caring for the patients with a calm courage and quiet cheerfulness that revealed the girl's strong, self reliant character. Clara's condition had not changed. She still lay as if sleeping. Alice reported that once in the afternoon she had moved her lips and distinctly called for water. Mr. Hardy and Bess sat down to the supper table by themselves, and Bess again told how she had been saved from even a scratch in that terrible fall. It was indeed remarkable that the child did not seem to suffer even from the general shock and reaction from the disaster.

After a brief meal Mr. Hardy went up stairs to Clara again. His chief anxiety now was for her. He believed that if the doctor's fears were realized she would become insane. It was not possible that a person of her temperament and passion could be otherwise in case she should come to consciousness of her condition.

As the evening wore on Mr. Hardy felt that his duty lay in his own home for that night, and he would have to see his minister some other time. He thought of the prayer meeting with regret and sat by the bed of the unconscious girl wondering how it was possible that for all these years gone by he had been so indifferent to one of the best and most precious opportunities for growing in spiritual manhood. He heard the bell ring for service, and when it stopped he sat with his face in his hands praying.

The prayer meeting in Mr. Jones' church was generally a very quiet affair. A good many people in the church, especially those who came to the meeting only occasionally, thought it was stupid. But it was a noticeable fact that those who attended regularly were the ones who did the most work in the church and the ones who grew stronger and sweeter in the Christian life. There was usually no regular subject given out. There was very little talking done: From beginning to close it was nearly all prayer. Mr. Jones did not feel afraid of the long pauses. He believed modern American life to be so full of nervousness and hurry that it would not hurt any one to sit still and think a minute or two.

That was the reason so many people called Mr. Jones' prayer meetings dull, because they were not rushing all the time with sensational or exciting remarks and incidents. Mr. Jones didn't believe that was what a prayer meeting was for, and he planned for it accordingly. But this particular evening was an exception. The great railroad accident so near them had stirred the entire community to its sympathetic depths. Several families in Mr. Jones' church had been sufferers. As if by tacit consent there was an unusually large gathering at the church, and the subject was of necessity the recent disaster.

It was a spontaneous meeting. The minister briefly opened with the expressed desire that God would bless the suffering, prepare the dying and comfort the living, and almost instantly a service of prayer began, which was like a flood in its continuous outpouring. The people seemed urged by some irresistible feeling to relieve the pent up strain of the day in prayer, and such prayers had not been heard in that church for many years.

A similar scene was witnessed near the White River Junction railroad disaster in 1887 in a church near the accident. The entire morning service was given up to prayer, which seemed the only healthy relief to people suffering from an overwhelming horror.

It was during the first pause that occurred that James Caxton opened the door and gave a note to some one in the back seat with a request that it be sent up to Mr. Jones. He then turned as if to go out, but hesitated, came back and slipped into a vacant seat and waited. Mr. Jones received the note, glanced at its contents and then rose. There was a singular emotion in his voice as he spoke.

"I have just been handed a note from one of our members, Mr. Robert Hardy, with the request that I read it aloud to the church tonight:

To You, My Dear Pastor, and You, My Brothers and Sisters In Christ:

I suppose it is known to most of you that three of my children were on the train during the recent accident, and two of them escaped with but slight injuries. But my daughter Clara was seriously injured by the shock, and I am at this moment seated by her side praying that her reason may be spared and her possible injuries prove to be within the region of cure.

I had planned to be with you tonight. I wanted to tell the church of the change that I have lately experienced. I do not need to tell you that for the 25 years that I have been a member of the church I have been a member only in name. I have seldom appeared in any of the spiritual or devotional services of the church. I have often sat in an attitude of criticism to the best preaching. I have been a hard man with those in my employ. I have been cold and even revengeful toward other members of this church. I have been a very proud, un-Christian, selfish man.

In the sight of God I have been an altogether unworthy member of the church of Christ. I do not take any pride to myself in making this confession, but I feel that it is due to you, and something tells me I shall have more peace of mind if I speak to you as I have lately prayed to God.

It is not necessary, neither have I time nor strength, to tell you how I have been brought to see my selfishness in all its enormity. It is enough if I say to you that I most sincerely believe that I have misunderstood very largely the right meaning of human existence. I want to pray with you and for you. You will let me say this also, bearing with me, as this may be my last opportunity to say to you what lies in my heart: Serve the church of Christ, all you who have taken upon you its vows, with enthusiasm and loyalty. Stand by the superintendent of the Sunday school, attend this week night service when you can, making it the most important service of the week, and, more than all, live true, simple, loving Christian lives every day.

It may seem strange that I am preaching like this to you who have probably done your duty far better than I ever did, but I wish to say what lies deep in my heart to say tonight. If there are any young men in the meeting tonight, I want to say to them, become Christians at the core, not in name simply, as I have been, and, above all, kneel down every morning, noon and night and pray to God to keep you from a selfish life—such a life as I have lived—forgetful of church vows, of the rights of the working poor, of the brother and sister in Christ. Yes, I would be willing that any young man might say, "O Lord, keep me from living as selfish and useless and proud a life as Robert Hardy once lived!" For that is the truth. No one but God knows how I have suffered at the thought of the past, how I am suffering at the present moment.

I pray that any who are afflicted at this present time may find peace in him who bore the world's sorrows in his great heart of love. If it were not for my faith in my Saviour at this time, I should be in despair. As it is, I am suffering, but it is not the suffering which follows an eclipse of hope. I believe in the eternal life and in the forgiveness of sins, yea, even such sins as mine have been. Forgive so much about myself. It is necessary under the circumstances. I ask your prayers for me as your petitions go up for the afflicted and repentant everywhere. I am, your brother in Christ, ROBERT HARDY.

The impression made by the reading of this letter was profound. The stillness that followed was deathlike. Then one of the oldest men in the room rose and in a prayer of great power prayed for the absent man and thanked God for his guided strength. The prayer was followed by others, and then one and another of the members who had not been on really good terms with Mr. Hardy arose and confessed and asked forgiveness. The hearts of the people were greatly moved. Mr. Jones, contrary to his usual habit, asked as the meeting drew to a close if there were any present who wanted to begin that Christian life at the core of which Mr Hardy spoke.

"I see a number here not professing Christians. Are there any who would like to say that they want to become Christians and will try to live the Christ life every day?"

In the pause that followed James Caxton, who had been sitting in the back seat, felt as if some power within and without him were forcing him to his feet. He grasped his chair as if to hold himself down, but the Holy Spirit whispered to him, "Son, this will be the beginning of a new life to thee."

And so James Caxton arose and said he wanted to be a Christian, and from that moment he dated his strong, consecrated life, a life that bids fair to become famous in the world yet, and his action was the beginning of a new life in that church and community, but we cannot dwell on that in the course of this history.

Oh, Robert Hardy, the good God is blessing thee in this thy week of trial!

And so James Caxton arose and said he wanted to be a Christian.

For was it not thy word that first started this young, manly soul to consider what he owed to Jesus the Christ?

To come back to Robert. He had written the note, beginning it just a little after the bell ceased ringing, and as he finished James had come over to see if he could be of any service. The church was near by, and Mr. Hardy asked him to take the note over. He went over to the church, with the result described. He did not come back at once, and Mr. Hardy watched on with Alice.

Will slept irregularly, being troubled with his dreams of the accident. Mrs. Hardy woke and begged her husband to lie down and get a little rest. He did so, but was aroused about 10 o'clock by the doctor coming in. He had just finished a visit near by. He saw the light and was anxious, as the case was an extraordinary one, to come in. He examined Clara's face very keenly and then sat down by the bed for an instant. After giving certain medicines he found that he was in need of another article, which was at his house.

"I will go and get it, doctor. It's not far, and I think a little fresh air will do me good and help me to remain awake better," said Robert.

He went down stairs, and the doctor followed him as he went out into the hall and flung on his overcoat. Mr. Hardy turned before he opened the door:

"Doctor, tell me the truth about my girl? What is her condition?"

"It is serious, but more than that I cannot say. There is a possibility that by means of a slight operation the disastrous consequences of the shock to her eyes may be averted, and it is possible that the other results which I hinted may be altogether different. It is not in medical power to decide with certainty."

So Mr. Hardy went out into the night with a glimmer of hope in his breast. It was snowing again, and a strong wind was blowing, so he buttoned his big coat close up, drew his hat down over his brows and, leaning forward, walked as rapidly as he could against the wind in the direction of the doctor's house. The streets were almost deserted. The lights at the corners flickered and showed pale through the lamps.

As he turned down a narrow street, intending to make a short cut across a park that lay near the doctor's, he was suddenly seized by three or four young men, and one of them said in a tone which betrayed a drunken debauch:

"Hold up your hands and deliver! You've got plenty of chink, and we haven't! So no squalling, or we'll shoot you for it!"

Mr. Hardy was taken completely by surprise. But he was a vigorous, athletic man, and his first impulse was to shake himself loose, to knock down two of his assailants next to him and make a run for it. His next glance, however, showed him the nature of the group of young men. They were not professional robbers, but young men about town who had been drinking late and were evidently out on a lark and were holding him up just for fun.

Mr. Hardy guessed exactly right. What could he do? Two of the young men were known to him, the sons of the Bramleys, who were well to do people in Barton. Mr. Hardy's next impulse was to discover himself to them and beg then to quit such dangerous fooling and go home. The three other young men were in shadow, and he could not tell them. All this passed through his thought with a flash. But before he had time to do anything a police officer sprang out of a doorway near by, and the group of young men, dropping their hold of Mr. Hardy, fled in different directions.

The officer made pursuit and after a short run captured one of the young men, whom, after vigorous resistance, he dragged back to where Mr. Hardy stood, exclaiming:

"Here's one of the rascals, sir. I heard 'em when they held you up. We've been looking for this gang some time now. Just identify this one if he is the one that just now grabbed you, sir."

Under the light of the lamp the policeman dragged the form of his victim and roughly struck up his hat. At that instant Mr. Hardy looked into his face and cried out:

"George! Is it you?"

And the son replied as he started back:

"Father!"

The two looked at each other in silence, while the snow fell in whirling flakes about them.

And this was the end of Robert Hardy's third day.

TO BE CONTINUED.