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ROBERT HARDY'S SEVEN DAYS

A DREAM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.
By Rev. CHARLES M. SHELDON.
Author of "In His Steps," "The Crucifixion of Philip Strong," "Malcom Kirk," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]
CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Hardy looked at his son sternly, standing at the little distance off he had recoiled after that first recognition of the boy. It would be difficult to describe his emotions. He had never been an affectionate father to his boys. He had generally given them money when they asked for it and had not questioned them about its use. He was not familiar with his older son's habits and only within the last few days had he known that he was what the age popularly designates as "fast." He had never made a companion of his son. He had not grown up with him, so that now as he faced him under the strange circumstances that had brought them together he was actually at a loss to know what to do or say.

The thought that his son was guilty of a crime which might put him behind prison bars did not yet occur to his mind. He was only conscious of a great longing to get back home and there have a thorough talk with his boy in the hope of winning him to better things. But he must say something to George.

The police officer stared in wonder after the first startled cry of "Father!" on the part of the young man, but he did not loosen his hold on him. He took an extra twist in the coat collar of his captive and looked sharply at Mr. Hardy as much as to say, "He may be your son, but he's my victim, and I mean to keep a good clutch on him."

George was the first to speak: "Father, you know I wouldn't do such a thing really. We were only out for a little fun. We didn't know you, of course. We didn't mean any real harm. We were only fooling."

"It was dangerous fooling," replied his father. He still stood apart from the boy and spoke quietly, but his face was pale, and his heart was wrung with torture for his firstborn.

Ah, how careless of him he had been! How little companionship the two had had! How very little help the boy had received from the man!

Now, believing that only four more days lay before him to use to the glory of God, Robert Hardy felt the sting of that bitterest of all bitter feelings, useless regret, the regret that does not carry with it any hope of redemption; a selfish past.

After his father had spoken George sullenly remained silent. Mr. Hardy bowed his head and seemed thinking. The officer, who had been waiting for another move on the part of the older man, said:

"Well, we must be moving on. It's warmer in the lockup than out here. So come along, young fellow, and do your talking tomorrow morning with the rest of the drunks and disorderlies."

"Stop!" cried Robert Hardy. "This is my son! Do you understand? What are you going to do?"

"Well, governor, that's a pretty question at this time of day. Do! I'm going to jug him for assault with intent to commit highway robbery. It's an affair for the 'pen,' I can tell you."

"But you heard him say it was all a joke."

"A pretty joke to try to hold a man up on the highway and demand his money! Oh, no! That's carrying a joke too far. I'm bound to obey orders. We've been after this gang of young chaps for a month now."

"But, officer, you don't understand! This is my son!"

"Well, what of that? Don't we jug sons every day for some devilry or other? - Do you suppose you are the only father whose son is going to the devil?"

"O God, no!" cried Mr. Hardy, with sudden passion. "But this is my older boy. It would kill his mother to have him arrested and put in jail for trying to rob his own father. Yet he was once innocent— What am I saying? He might be now if I had done my duty."

Mr. Hardy confronted the officer with a certain sorrowful dignity which even that hardened defender of the law understood.

was not the one who assaulted me. He did not touch me. You could not get a particle of testimony against him. And besides that, it is necessary that he return with me. This is a case for the law of God. This belongs to a higher court."

The officer hesitated; Mr. Hardy stepped nearer his son. "George," he said as if forgetting for a moment that the officer was present, "did you know that Clara and Bess and Will were in the accident last night?"

George turned pale and tremblingly replied: "No, father. Were they hurt? Was Bess?"

"The boy seemed moved as his father had not yet seen him. "No; they were not—that is, Bess was not hurt at all. But Will was severely bruised, and Clara still lies in a state of stupor or unconsciousness, and we do not know what the end will be. I was on my way just now to get some needed articles from the doctor's house. You must come back with me. The law has no hold on you."

"Maybe the law hasn't any hold on him, but Michael Finnerty has. I don't just like the idea, mister man, of letting the boy go yet," replied the stubborn and unusually dutiful officer.

Mr. Hardy began to appeal to the man's love of his own children. It did not seem to move him in the least until he mentioned the fact that it was cruelty to keep the suffering girl at home waiting for her father's return.

Finnerty finally loosened his hold on George and said slowly and painfully: "And if I lose me job I'll be knowing who was to blame for it. I always told Michael Finnerty that he was too soft hearted to go on the force!"

"You won't suffer, officer. Many thanks! Come, George." And father and son moved off together, while the defender of the law stood irresolute, watching them disappear through the storm and muttering to himself: "I'm a soft hearted fool. I ought to 'a' been born a female hospital nurse, I had."

During that walk home, after Mr. Hardy had gone around by the doctor's with George, not a word was exchanged. The storm was increasing. The two walked along in silence, but when George walked into the hall at home he turned and saw a look on his father's face that smote him to the heart, for he was not yet a hardened soul.

Mr. Hardy had lived years in that experience. No one could tell how his heart had been tortured by what he had endured that night, but the mark of it was stamped physically on his face, and he knew that he would bear it to his grave.

Mrs. Hardy came running down stairs as the two came in, and as George turned and faced her she held out her arms, crying: "My boy! My boy! We have been so anxious about you!"

What, not one word of reproach, of rebuke, of question as to what he had been doing all this time that the family had been suffering! No; not one word. Ah, mother love! It is the most wonderful thing on earth, next to the love of God for the sinner. It is even that, for it is the love of God expressing itself through the mother, who is the temple of the loving God.

George dashed away a tear and then, going up to his mother, laid his cheek against hers, and she folded her arms about him and cried a little and asked no questions, and after a moment's silence he stammered out a few words of sorrow at having caused her pain, and she joyfully accepted his broken explanation of how he had not known of the accident to Clara and the others.

It was true he had gone out the evening before, fully intending to go down to the scene of the accident; but, coming across some of his old companions, he had gone off with them and spent the night in a disgraceful carouse and throughout the day had been under the influence of liquor more or less, dimly conscious that a great disaster had happened down the road, but not sober enough to realize its details or its possible connection with those of his own home.

The sudden meeting with his father had started him out of the drowsy intoxication he had fallen into as the day progressed. Now, as he felt his mother's arms around him and realized a little what the family had been called upon to endure, he felt the shame and disgrace of his own conduct.

Mr. Hardy went up stairs and consulted with the doctor, who wondered at his protracted absence. There was no change in Clara yet. She lay in a condition which could not be called a trance nor a sleep. She did not seem to be in any great pain, but she was unconscious of all outside conditions.

After a little talk with his mother George came up and inquired after Bess and Will. They were both sleeping, and after the doctor had gone out the father and mother and son sat down together in the room where Clara lay.

Mr. Hardy did not say a word to George about the incident of the evening. The shame of it was too great yet. When men of Mr. Hardy's self contained, repressed, proud nature are pained, it is with an intense inward fire of passion that cannot bear to break out into words.

George had sense enough to offer to relieve his parents of the burden of watching during the night, and during the exchange of watchers along toward morning, as Mrs. Hardy slipped into the room to relieve the boy, she found him kneeling down at a couch with his face buried in the cushions. She raised her face in thanksgiving to God and went softly out.

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Mrs. Hardy found him kneeling down at a couch.

before. Mr. Hardy thanked God for it, and a prayer went out of his heart for his own son, that the Spirit might touch him in his sin and bring him into the light of Christ.

A little after noon the storm cleared up, and Robert prepared to go down to the shops. Clara had not yet come out of her stupor. The doctor had called and done what he could. There was nothing in particular that Mr. Hardy could do in the case, so he went out about 1 o'clock and entered his office at the shop, hoping as he went in that he would have no trouble with the men.

Mr. Burns reported everything quiet, and the manager, with a sigh of relief, proceeded with the routine duties of the business. Nothing of any special interest occurred through the afternoon. The storm had ceased entirely, and the sun had come out clear and warm. People were clearing off the walks, and the ringing of sleigh bells was distinct in the office, even over the incessant hum of the big engine.

Toward 3 o'clock one of Mr. Hardy's old friends, an officer of the road, came in and said there was a general movement on foot through Barton to hold a monster mass meeting in the town hall for the benefit of the sufferers, both in the railroad accident and in the explosion of the Sunday before in the shops. It was true the company would settle for damages, but in many cases through Barton the adjustment of claims would not be made until much suffering and hardship had been endured.

There was a common feeling on the part of the townspeople that a meeting for public conference would result in much good, and there was also, as has been the case in other large horrors, a craving to relieve the strain of feeling by public gathering and consultation.

"Can you come out to the meeting, Hardy?" asked his friend.

Mr. Hardy thought a minute and replied, "Yes; I think I can." Already an idea had taken shape in his mind which he could not help feeling was inspired by God.

"It might be a good thing if you could come prepared to make some remarks. I find there is a disposition on the part of the public to charge the road with carelessness and mismanagement."

"I'll say a word or two," replied Mr. Hardy, and after a brief talk on business matters his friend went out.

ted down copious notes. The thought which had come to him when his friend suggested the meeting was this: He would go and utter a message that burned within him, a message which the events of the past few days made imperative should be uttered. He went home absorbed in the great idea. He had once in his younger days been famous for his skill in debate. He had no fear of his power to deliver a message of life at the present crisis in his own. He at once spoke of the meeting to his wife.

"Mary, what do you say? I know every minute is precious. I owe to you and these dear ones at home a very sacred duty, but no less, it seems to me, is my duty to the society where I have lived all these years, doing literally nothing for its uplift toward God, who gave us all life and power. I feel as if he would put a message into my mouth that would prove a blessing to this community. It seems to me this special opportunity is providential."

"Robert," replied his wife, smiling at him through happy tears, "it is the will of God. Do your duty as he makes it clear to you."

It had been an agitating week to the wife. She anticipated its close with a feeling akin to terror. What would the end be? She was compelled to say to herself that her husband was not insane, but the thought that he was really to be called out of the world in some mysterious manner at the end of the rapidly approaching Sunday had several times come over her with a power that threatened her own reason.

Nevertheless the week so far, in spite of its terror and agitation, had a sweet joy for her. Her husband had come back to her, the lover as he once had been, only with the added tenderness of all the years of their companionship. She thanked the Father for it, and when the hour came for Robert to go down to the meeting she blessed him and prayed heaven to make his words to the people like the words of God.

"Father, what do you want me to do? Shall I stay here?" asked George, who had not stirred out of the house all day. He had watched by Clara faithfully. She was still in that mysterious condition of unconsciousness which made her case so puzzling to the doctor.

Mr. Hardy hesitated a moment, then said: "No, George. I would like to have you go with me. Alice can do all that is necessary. But let us all pray together now before we go out. The Lord is leading us mysteriously, but we shall some time know the reason why."

So in the room where Clara lay they all knelt down except Will, who lay upon a lounge near his unconscious sister. Mr. Hardy as he clasped his wife's hand in his own poured out his soul in this petition:

"Dear Lord, we know thou dost love us, even though we cannot always know why thou dost allow suffering and trouble, and we would thank thee for the things that cannot be destroyed, for the loves that cannot suffer death, for the wonderful promises of the life to come. Only we have been so careless of the things that belong to thy kingdom. We have been so selfish and forgetful of the great needs and sufferings and sins of earth. Pardon us, gracious Redeemer. Pardon me, for I am the chief offender. Yea, Lord, even as the robber on the cross was welcomed into paradise, welcome thou me. But we pray for our dear ones. May they recover. Make this beloved one who now lies unknowing among us to come back into the universe of sense and sound, to know us and smile upon us again."

"We say, 'Thy will be done.' Grand wisdom, for thou knowest best. Only our hearts will cry out for help, and thou knowest our hearts better than any one else. Bless me this night as I stand before the people. This is no selfish prayer, dear Lord. I desire only thy glory; I pray only for thy kingdom. But thou hast appointed my days to live. Thou hast sent me the message, and I cannot help feeling the solemn

burden and joy of it.

"I will say to the people that they art most important of all in this habitation of the flesh. And now bless us all. Give us new hearts. Make us to feel the true meaning of existence here. Reveal to us thy splendor. Forgive all the past and make impossible in the children the mistakes of the parent. Deliver us from evil, and thine shall be the kingdom forever. Amen."

When Mr. Hardy and George reached the town hall, they found a large crowd gathering. They had some difficulty in gaining entrance. Mr. Hardy at once passed up to the platform, where the chairman of the meeting greeted him and said he would expect him to make some remarks during the evening.

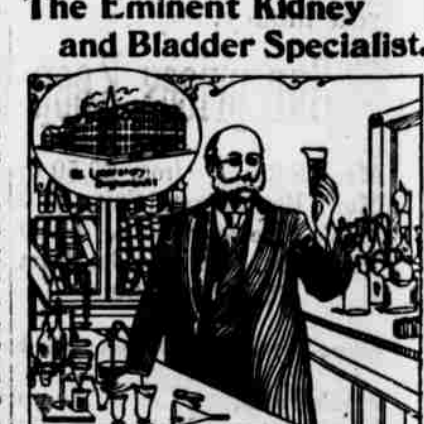
Robert sat down at one end of the platform and watched the hall fill with people, nearly all well known to him. There was an unusually large crowd of boys and young men, besides a large gathering of his own men from the shops, together with a great number of citizens and business men, a representative audience for the place, brought together under the influence of the disaster and feeling somewhat the breaking down of artificial social distinctions in the presence of the grim leveler Death, who had come so near to them the last few days.

There were the usual opening exercises common to such public gatherings. Several well known business men and two or three of the ministers, including Mr. Jones, made appropriate addresses. The attention of the great audience was not labored for, the occasion itself being enough to throw over the people the spell of subdued quiet.

When the chairman announced that "Mr. Robert Hardy, our well known railroad manager, will now address us," there was a movement of curiosity and some surprise, and many a man leaned forward and wondered in his heart what the wealthy railroad man would have to say on such an occasion. He had never appeared as a speaker in public, and he passed generally in Barton for the cold, selfish, haughty man he had always been.

CHAPTER X.
Mr. Hardy began in a low, clear tone: "Men and Women of Barton—Tonight I am not the man you have known me these 25 years I have been among you. I am, by the grace of God,

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