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Author of "In His Steps," "Crucifixion of Philip Strong," "Robert Hardy's Seven Days."
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CHAPTER VI.
"WHOM GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER LET NO MAN PUT ASUNDER."

He had come directly to his subject, feeling that it was best so. Mrs. Penrose looked at him in the greatest astonishment.

"You—love—Dorothy?" she said slowly.

"Yes," replied Malcom Kirk simply. "I have loved her for four years. Ever since I entered the seminary. In fact," Mrs. Penrose sat still and looked more keenly at the awkward, homely figure in her reception room. She was a woman of great quickness of perception. To do her justice she had pre-eminently a large fund of fairness and a sense of justice which came to her through a long line of pilgrim ancestors. She saw in the man who had just declared his love for her niece so abruptly something more than a common average man. There was a look in his eye that spoke of limitless endurance, and his voice was of an unusual quality, very nearly if not quite equal to a rare gift of music or art.

She rose and walked over to the window and looked far down the beach. Then she turned toward Malcom Kirk and said with some emphasis:

"What you have so suddenly told me, Mr. Kirk, is, I need not say, a complete surprise to me. I suppose you know that Mr. Raleigh is a lover of Dorothy?"

"No more than I am," said Malcom Kirk quickly.

"I suppose you know he is an old friend of the family and that Mr. Gilbert favored his suit?"

"That has nothing to do with my love for her," said Malcom Kirk softly.

Mrs. Penrose smiled slightly. Then she frowned and looked somewhat anxiously at him.

"What do you expect to do?" she asked somewhat vaguely.

"I am going to ask Dorothy Gilbert to be my wife."

"If she loves you?" said Mrs. Penrose, a little grimly.

"Of course, if she loves me," replied Malcom Kirk simply.

There was silence in the room. A servant came in quietly and lighted two long candles on the mantel. The dusk and the candlelight blended together softly, and Malcom Kirk looked out of his side of the room at Dorothy's aunt, with a somewhat pale face, calm, however, and fully self-possessed. Even Francis Raleigh, with all his inherited instincts toward gentlemanly habits, was not equal to Malcom Kirk during a supreme crisis.

Mrs. Penrose went over to the window again. Then she returned and took a seat nearer Malcom Kirk.

"Of course after what you have told me, Mr. Kirk, it will be—you see the awkwardness of the situation—it will be embarrassing for you and Mr. Raleigh to meet."

"Why?" asked Malcom Kirk.

"Well, it will, won't it?" she asked in some slight irritation.

"I don't think so. I have nothing to be embarrassed about."

Mrs. Penrose was silent again. After the lapse of a few moments she said:

"I have not asked you what your prospects are, Mr. Kirk. Pardon me if I seem abrupt, but you have set me the example. I am the nearest relative Dorothy has now since my brother's death. She has been accustomed all her life to the comforts of wealth. To such comforts as these. Her glance swept the room carelessly, but with studied meaning. "May I ask what you can offer Dorothy in case?"

"In case she becomes my wife?" said Malcom Kirk, completing the sentence.

"Yes, in case she becomes your wife."

His face had grown a little paler, and the muscles around his mouth had stiffened while Mrs. Penrose was speaking. But he observed her calmly enough.

"I can offer her a home and comforts. I have a definite position. I do not need to say that I am poor. My life in the Home Missionary field to which I am going will be full of hardships. My wife would share them with me. I ought perhaps to say—he spoke with the first hesitation he had yet shown—"that I have a possible source of income in my pen. I expect to earn as much as my salary by that means. I have once or twice done that during my college and seminary course."

"So that the most you can offer my niece would be \$1,200 or \$1,500 a year?" asked Mrs. Penrose, with the nearest approach to sharpness.

"By no means, madam!" said Malcom Kirk, and his face glowed with the eloquence of his answer. "This is not the most I can offer her. The most I can offer is the love I bear her, and all the money in the world without that would be very little to offer."

"He's right about that," Mrs. Penrose spoke to herself softly. Malcom Kirk did not hear what she said, but then at that time he did not know her history nor the inner emptiness of her unloved married life.

ed the reception room alone. She came in with her head erect, and there was light enough for her aunt



"Yes, I will share your life with you. Yes, I love you."

and Malcom Kirk to see in her face the tokens of some recent excitement.

"Where is Francis?" Mrs. Penrose asked.

"He is not coming back tonight," replied Dorothy softly, and then for the first time she saw Malcom Kirk standing there by the fireplace.

She took an eager step toward him and then suddenly stopped, while her face glowed rosy red in the candlelight. As for Malcom Kirk, he stood very erect and still, but out of his eyes shone the lover's look as he faced the woman of his heart's longing. He did not try to conceal it, and Dorothy knew as well as if he had spoken it aloud that he said, "I love you, Dorothy Gilbert, and I cannot do my life work best without you." Mrs. Penrose saw that look also and respected it.

The servant entered and announced that tea was ready, and Malcom Kirk found himself shaking hands with Dorothy and saying some very common thing about being glad to meet her. A few minutes later he found himself at the table with Dorothy and her aunt. He ate and talked at first with a repressed excitement that gradually became a source of eloquent conversation. No one asked any more questions about Francis Raleigh. It is certain that Mrs. Penrose and Malcom Kirk understood that he had pleaded his suit again with Dorothy and had again been unsuccessful.

"She has given him his answer," said Malcom Kirk to himself, and there was the first positive hope in his heart that he had dared to feel. He had never appeared to such good advantage. Mrs. Penrose, experienced as she was in the ways of society and familiar with some of the most brilliant men and women, felt a positive charm in Kirk's voice and manner. His awkwardness for awhile was subordinate to his higher gifts.

Mr. Penrose was in New York on business. Malcom Kirk learned afterward some things in his history and why John Gilbert had been allowed to meet his great financial losses without help from his own sister, who to a large extent had been powerless to persuade her husband to come to her brother's aid. But she was absorbed tonight in the thought of Dorothy. He knew that a crisis in his life had come.

After tea they went into the reception room again. Mrs. Penrose staid for half an hour and then suddenly went out, and Dorothy and Malcom Kirk were left alone.

He was fully aware that the whole future of his life would be shaped by the events of the next few minutes, but he had never felt more a Christian than now. There was a positive religious excitement of the highest, purest, noblest character in all the thought of his love for Dorothy. There always had been. He felt that it was no cheap or silly or shallow sentiment that moved him to think of her as of no other being in the world. There had not been a night of his life since he began to love her when he had failed to speak her name in a prayer. He knew that his Christian faith was sanctified and beautified by this human love.

He rose and went over near her. He had the miniature in his hand. When he spoke, it was in great simplicity, but in great directness.

"You know what I have come for. You know that I love you wholly. You know what my life will be. You know that I am poor. Dorothy, can you share such a life with me? Must I give this back, or may I keep it always?"

She was sitting with her face partly in shadow, and she slowly rose and turned and faced him. Like all girls who dream of lovers, she had her dreams, her ideals, her imaginings. She looked up at him now, and the blood rushed impetuously through him

as he saw the beginning of her answer. She had learned to love him during his absence abroad, during her recent sorrow, during the days that followed her bereavement. It was not so sudden as it might seem, for Dorothy had learned when Raleigh spoke to her that afternoon that the greatest reason why she could not love him was because she already loved Malcom Kirk. So she gave him then and there what he asked. Ah, Malcom Kirk, not this side of heaven will you know the power of that flood that lifted your heart and all it contained when you first heard the woman you loved say as she lifted her face to yours: "Yes, I will share your life with you. Yes, I love you."

Two hours later Malcom Kirk went out into the starry night and down on the sea beach, and with the freshness of the sea breeze blowing about his uncovered head he thanked God for the precious, priceless gift of this woman's heart. They had had much to say, as true lovers always have. Always they had come back to the undying theme of their love for each other. "She loves me!" he kept saying to himself. And the waves and the night wind and the stars and the harbor lights and the pines near the beach all joined in the same song. He walked up and down the sands until the early morning. He found his face wet once with tears. He ran across a long strip of beach exultant and walked from one of his reveries to find himself knee deep in water, for the tide was coming in, and he knew nothing of tides, only of the one that had risen in his own spirit.

But he drew back out of the water, laughing, and finally found his way to the inn down by the pier where he had breakfasted. But what he ate or whether he ate anything was probably unknown to him; at least he was not able to give Dorothy satisfactory answers when he came back to the house.

His dream was a reality. She met him with the look on her face that was never to die out of it as long as he lived, and together they went to see Mrs. Penrose.

Dorothy's aunt was somewhat perplexed and, to tell the truth, a good deal astonished at the events of the last 24 hours. Dorothy had told her all, and there was no question in Mrs. Penrose's mind that the daughter of John Gilbert had made her definite glad choice of this awkward, unhand-some, poor young minister as her future husband. She could not deny that the young man was a gentleman; also that he had very superior qualities of mind and heart. But the fact remained that he had no prospects except his Home Missionary field and a somewhat uncertain income from occasional writings.

When she pictured Dorothy in a sod house or a dugout or a shanty in that vague, wild, uncouth place called "out west," living in a parish of plain, un-cultured people, such as she placidly took for granted lived on the prairie, Mrs. Penrose felt as if D-

strange choice was the strangest thing she ever knew.

"And yet she loves him truly," she said to herself as Dorothy and Malcom Kirk came in that morning, both of them glorified by the greatest thing in all the world. Dorothy had never looked so beautiful. Kirk had never felt so like a giant in possibility.

Dorothy had anticipated remonstrances and opposition from her aunt. She was surprised and gratified to find how calmly Mrs. Penrose accepted the matter. Even when Malcom Kirk expressed his wish, gravely, but with firmness, that they might be married at once and go together to the new parish to begin their life together Mrs. Penrose offered no decided objection.

"You are neither of you children," she finally said to Dorothy, with a sad smile. "You know your own minds by this time. I want you to be married here in this house, of course. It seems very sudden. But I don't blame Mr. Kirk."

"Of course not," said Malcom Kirk decidedly as he looked Dorothy in the face.

So it came about that a month later the president of the seminary faculty came down to Beverly one morning, and Dorothy and Malcom Kirk were married in the presence of a very few of Dorothy's Hermon friends and two of Kirk's classmates who had been settled over parishes near Boston. Kirk had made all his preparations for leaving. A few days before he was married the president of the faculty had surprised him with the announcement that the sales of his pamphlet had been set aside by the publishers for the benefit of the seminary, but by unanimous consent the entire amount, something over \$200, was now at Kirk's disposal. Malcom Kirk was not going to be a penniless bridegroom in any case. He had already received since his return from abroad several checks for writing he had done during his last year in the seminary and while in London. So he was able to start toward the new home with much courage and the knowledge that Dorothy would not miss too many of the old luxuries.

But Dorothy, once she had given her heart to Malcom Kirk and said to him that she would share his life, entered upon a new and contented experience, such as in all her luxurious life she had never before felt. It is perfectly true that she loved him without condition. She put her hand in his with the trustful confidence of a child, and it is no exaggeration to say that she would have been happy with him anywhere, rich or poor, famous or obscure, successful or defeated.

The train whirled them on into the west. Into the land of the prairies.

Into the land of new things, of those vague possibilities that always go with an untried community. And Dorothy every moment felt more and more content. Malcom Kirk satisfied her ideals. His noble nature was continually re-

vealing to her new phases of his Christian purpose. He had enthusiasm, and he was the only man who had ever been able to kindle hers. The thought that they were to work together filled her with a heavenly delight. She rejoiced in his strength, his manhood, his inward life.

As for Malcom Kirk, he was transformed by all that he now possessed. His poor Home Missionary church became to his thought a gigantic engine of power, with this glorious woman now his wife, who was to be by his side henceforth. He trembled at the extent of such a love and consecrated it every moment to the infinite eternal life that belongs both to this world and to that which is to come.

They reached their journey's end at the close of a day and entered the town by night. There was quite a little gathering at the station, curious to see the new minister, and the superintendent himself, who happened that week to be in that part of the state, was present to welcome them and introduce them to a little band of their parishioners.

There was a parsonage, a furnished house of five rooms, close by the church. A supper was ready for them. A little company came in afterward to greet them, and the people seemed to be truly glad to see them. The sight of Dorothy's beauty astonished them all. She was a little amused at the evident look of disappointment with which every one first saw her husband.

"When they know him, they will love him," she said to herself, with unfaltering trust in his victory over them.

She came out on the porch with him after all the members had gone away, and together they tried to get some idea of the place which was to be their home. The night was starry and the prairie vastness impressive to them. They had never either of them lived outside of a hill country.

"How large did you say the town was, Malcom?"

"About 1,500 people, so the superintendent says."

"How many church members are there?"

"Fifty-seven on the roll. About 40 living here."

"Can't we go over and look into the church? I am curious to see it," said Dorothy. She spoke in such a glad, happy voice that Malcom Kirk, as he stood there with his arm about her, said, "You are happy, little woman, aren't you?"

"Can you ask?" she replied, and he was satisfied. One of the trustees had left a church key with him. They walked across the parsonage yard, taking a lamp from the house with them, and together they went in.

It was a small room with seats for about 150. A small classroom in the rear and a choir railing in front of the organ, which was in a little recess at one side of the platform.

Malcom Kirk set the lamp down on the pulpit and, with his wife, stood close to him, so you think we two can help to 'bring in the kingdom,' as you say, into this town?"

Malcom Kirk looked at the room, at his pulpit where he was to preach and at his wife, and he fully understood what Dorothy meant.

"Do you mean that we will see how much two people can do to make heaven on earth for 1,500 other people?"

"Yes, and whether in our lifetime we can redeem whatever is evil here and give it back to God."

"We will do it by his grace," replied Malcom Kirk gravely. It seemed to him almost as if they two, there in their little church, had made a solemn promise to redeem the souls of all the



"Do you think we two can help to 'bring in the kingdom,' as you say?"

lost in Conrad. They passed out of the church with the same feeling deep in their souls. Their hearts kindled at their opportunity. And in the infinite places of the heavenly hosts, good and evil, God and the devil noted the entrance of these two children of light into that lawless, un-Christian town of 25 years ago, and from what at once began to be there it seemed within the reach of a tremendous reality that heaven and hell began to struggle for a supremacy marked by events which will leave their record in the book of life with startling clearness. For these two Christians had entered the arena of the great human battle for victory over the world, and the two greatest forces in the universe now began to test their powers as they had never yet been tested in that place.

[TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.]

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