A STEWARD OF MYSTERIES

By Jane Ellis Joy.

CHAPTER III.

Fruits of the Spirit.

Moonlight and starlight bathed All Souls' somber brown-stone buildings, both of which were also lighted from within. Whitman and Cyril, having drifted into the class-room at the close of the mid-week prayer meeting, were talking over class affairs.

"Did you ever do any window dressing, decorating, and that sort of thing in Kishbaum's?" Whitman asked Ford suddenly.

"I helped at Christmas," said Cyril.

"Glad we met here to-night, then We want to have the classroom decorated and arranged, with due regard to Easter, for the banquet on Thursday night, and we're short a 'star' decorator. You wont say no will you?" Though I don't want to rush work on you merely because you're willing."

"Do you think I can do it well enough. I wish I were an expert, but I'll do the best I can."

"Count the job yours. I'll promise you one helper in myself, though I must own I've had no practice in that line."

"Have you any material to decorate with?"

"I'm afraid not. We are borrowing the plants. Suppose you get what you think will be needed at Kishbaum's, and charge the account to me personally."

"All right," said Cyril, filled with the gladness peculiar to one who feels he is filling a real need.

A week later, in Classroom 9 of the Sunday-school, Cyril Ford, in his shirt-sleeves, with a basket of Easter ornaments on the rest of the step-ladder on which he stood, was pinning butterflies to the white, fluted gauze with which he had draped the walls of the room on the preceding evening.

Meanwhile a transformation had been wrought in the men's class-room. Between the windows fresh potted plants, smelling of the earth, were tastefully arranged in terraces. Mr. Kishbaum had kindly loaned a fine statue of Life from his store art room, and the white marble rose imposingly in a little garden of palms.

Strains of solemn hymn music wafted across the narrow court from the church now and then, and Cyril, in subdued tones, joined in the praise as he worked, his face radiant with the hope that was singing in his heart. He had discovered that the world was fair; that despite many things that he wished were different, evil was temporary, and good, supreme and immortal. Not yet had he formulated any new plans for his future. Mr. Kishbaum had told him his salary would be raised at Easter. Now he could help his family more. He was stepping into the light. He could not see far, but with the faith that had come to him, "One step was enough"—that step being illuminated.

William Whitman had worked with him on Monday and Tuesday evenings. In the talks that they had had, Cyril had learned something about the Whitman family, and William had learned incidentally about the burden that Cyril had been carrying for a year.

The Doxology was sung, and directly the patter of feet on the pavement could be heard, as the worshippers filed out of the court. Cyril hastened to the classroom and began the work where he had left it late the night before. William Whitman opened the rear door, stepping into the men's room to see how the decorations looked.

"I'm burning a good deal of gas," said Cyril.

"I'm afraid you're burning something more valuable, Mr. Ford. But you haven't been burning your candle at both ends for nothing!" He took a turn or two about the room, studying effects, and grew still more enthusiastic. "You've put the very spirit of Easter into it," he said. "This is glorious!"

"That's what I've been trying to make it," said Cyril, tingling with pleasure. "You see this will be a very real Easter to me. Somehow I must express a part of what I feel."

"Well, I should say you've done it. I don't know whether to call this work of yours a sermon or a poem! But you ought to go home now and get some rest."

"I have a few little touches to put on yet. But I won't be long."

"Is Mr. Batton improving?"

"He's doing very well. I called at the hospital on my way up to the church. I mentioned the class to Batton. He got interested at once. When he recovers, I believe he'll want to come in."

"That's what we like to hear. By the way Ford, I think you were premature in resigning your inclinations toward the ministry. You would make a fine preacher, I believe. Its not too late. You're still young."

"As things are, my family needs my help. I hope you don't think its necessary to preach in order to be a minister?"

"No," smiled William. "But preaching has its place. I hate to go home and have you working."

"Never mind. I won't be here won't be here much longer. Good-night."

Alone, Cyril sung softly, as he festooned the chandeliers:

"'Now bursts the light of blessed Eastertide.
Let songs of praise like billows roll;
The gates of heaven at last are opened wide;
No power has death to chain the soul.'"

He lowered the windows on opposite sides of the room, and enjoyed the fresh night air that swept through. At last the work of decorating was done. He viewed it critically, standing at one point, and then at another. The breath of the lilies was sweet, and the damp soil and mold on the flower-pots carried the odors of teeming, awakening earth.

He turned the gas down to try the effect of subdued light. Somehow he felt in no hurry to go home. Much had happened to him during the past ten days, and daily activities had hardly allowed him time to think. Here time was his own. The place was ideal for solemn reverie. The occasional wheeled vehicles that passed on the street, and the scraping trolleys, were unheard, as his eyes roamed from flower and plant to the symbols of immortality.

"I thought I was dead," he breathed, half audibly, "dead to social life and the world of pleasant activities—condemned to a grave of routine, a drudge—buried in the brick walls of a common boarding house. And now! drudgery is sweet! There is no death! It is life, life—and more abundant life! God is in the world, living in things—in me!"

Reverently he fell on his knees. "O Christ of the Empty Tomb, thou walkest in the streets of our city! We need no miracle to make us believe in thee. When we cry 'Lord, Lord,' beseeching thee for personal favors, and hiding thy gospel in a maze of words, we find thee not. Where work for the betterment of mankind is going on, there thou art, working with the workers. O wonderful Christ-love, ever fresh as the Easter buds, thou canst transform ugliness into beauty, commonness into distinction! Thy touch glorifies labor, and ennobles the laborer; it puts courage in the faint-hearted; it breaks the spell of selfishness, and reveals brother to brother! Amen."

Upborne by a sense of union with the Infinite, Cyril had no thought of time or place. The palms and ferns around him made wavy shadows as the breeze swept in the open windows. Confused street noises sounded like the gentle dripping of a fountain. Still on his knees, Cyril let his open eyes rest on the figure of Christ in the window. The face fascinated him as if the set lips were about to open for speech. Then, suddenly, a change came over the face that was startling.

No, it was not overwrought fancy, nor yet spiritual exaltation. He was sure that the figure in the window underwent a change. It was as if another face were looking through the Christ-face—another figure standing behind the Christ-figure. The wonder of the sight almost stopped Cyril's breath He rose to his feet expectant—listening for the sound of a footstep, as memories of old stories, discarded as pretty superstitions, rushed vividly upon his counciousness.

There was a gentle tapping at the door. Cyril opened it.

The man who stood there was large-eyed and hollow-cheeked, and threadbare as to clothing. The picture he presented was a striking contrast to the ruddy, robust, self-contained Henry Ford who had gone from Cyril's sight a year ago.

Pity mingled with Cyril's joy in the recognition. "Henry! Brother!" he cried, embracing the forlorn man as if he were a little child.

Evidently Henry Ford had expected no such demonstration. Tears filled his eyes as he took the arm-chair that Cyril placed for him. "I don't deserve this," he choked out.

"You've been ill, Henry?" Cyril asked gently, taking no notice of his brother's remark, as he drew up another chair.

"Yes."

"When did you get back to Myrtlebridge?"

"To-night. I walked the last hundred miles of the distance."

"Why didn't you write to me for help, Henry? I've written to you many times during the last six months, but always the letters came back from the post offices marked 'Unclaimed.'"

"How could I ask help from you after—the trouble I made you? And yet—oh, the shame of it—I have come back—broken, penniless—a sort of prodigal, to be reminded by you that the story of the prodigal is not overdrawn. I've had some pretty hard knocks since I left home, Cyril. I'm glad to be able to tell you that I haven't stolen, or begged, or lied, but I've been hungry and cold. I don't know why I wandered up to this part of the town. I certainly didn't expect to see you. I noticed the light in the chapel, and wondered what was going on so late at night. The streets looked unfamiliar, and I felt homeless and lost. Like the winged things of the air I was attracted by the lighted windows. As I came closer I heard singing. I wondered if my imagination was playing a trick on me, but I fancied that voice sounded like yours.

"As I came close to the church wall the singing stopped. I was curious to see the person who sang so much like you. I did not want to come in, but I wanted to see. So I climbed up on the stone coping of the stained-glass window, thinking that the colored glass would conceal me from view of the person inside."

"Yes, yes!" said Cyril, considerably moved.

"I couldn't see much through the colored glass," resumed Henry. "I crept around to the door and listened. But all was quiet. I smelled the lilies, and somehow—I hardly know how it was—I took courage and knocked. I'm glad I did."

"So am I."

"Tell me how the folks are. Poor mother!"

"Mother is fine!" Informed Cyril cheerfully. She's up to her neck in sewing, getting Minnie ready to be married in June. It's George."

"I'm glad he didn't break the engagement on my account. How is father?"

"He's holding his own. I heard from him the other day. He's in Richmond. Mother and Minnie are boarding at the Family Hotel in Rowena."

"And how came you to be here—all alone in this tropical garden? It's beautiful. It's a little paradise! I hope I don't profane it?"

"It's the men's Sunday-school room of All Souls'. The class makes everybody welcome. How I came to be here is too long a story to tell now. You must be hungry, Henry. Let's go to a restaurant, and have something to eat."

Cyril fastened the windows and locked the door from the outside, dropping the key in the janitor's letter-box, and the brothers started out in quest of refreshments. Globes of light dotted the long vistas of streets through which balmy breezes were floating with promises of spring. Not many people were now abroad.

"Cyril, you're greatly changed," said Henry, speaking after a spell of silence, as they walked. "Are you really different? Has anything happened? Or is it that I see differently?"

"Do you find me so different?"

"Yes. I used to be afraid of you when I reflected that I had gone wrong. That's why I didn't write. I didn't want you to know where I was. I felt you were made of other clay, and that you were out of sympathy with sinners."

"Forgive me Henry, for letting you get that idea. I guess I was a self-righteous prig. Yes, I am different now. I'm glad you see the change."

They found a restaurant open, and Henry had the first full meal that he had known for many days. As they sat at the table, Cyril told more about the men's class at All Souls' explaining what it had done for him.

"If there were more classes like that, I believe more young men would be kept straight," said Henry. "You see the old sort of class wasn't interesting. Of course, I don't mean to blame anybody for my misdoings. I knew better than I did."

The good food and the hot coffee helped to put courage into Henry; but most of all, his brother's brotherly sympathy helped him. Cyril left him a little after midnight in a comfortable hired room near the restaurant, with a sum of money that guaranteed a new suit of clothes and comforts for a week to come.

"Cyril hasn't lost faith in me," thought the older brother, with a joyful hope in his heart, as he sank into his comfortable bed. "I will justify that faith, God helping me. And he will help me. His hand led me home. It is the divine love I see in my brother's face!"

. . . . . .

The fine weather continued for another twenty-four hours, favoring the Easter banqueters. Although Cyril had not done his decorative work to gain the praise of men or women, he was human enough to be gratified by the compliments showered upon him on Thursday night. It was as he desired—to be seated beside Edith Bower at the table.

"What a lovely pin!" she said, appropriating the one beside her napkin, and placing it in her bodice above a sprig of white lilacs she was wearing. "It will always remind me of to-night. What a tremendous amount of work it must have been for you to get up this room like this!"

"It was, but I enjoyed it," he answered.

"Do you like your work at the store, Cyril?"

"Yes. One enjoys being in the tide of moving life. Then, one has opportunities. It was at the counter that I met Mr. Whitman, and learned of All Souls' class."

"Mother told me to invite you to see us. Do you care to come?"

"Do I?" He smiled, well pleased. It had been long since he had been invited out for an evening. "I have a favor to ask," he went on, when a day had been named for his visit.

"Anything in reason," she smiled.

"It concerns a young lady who, I think, would be benefited by belonging to your class. She boards where I do."

"Oh, you're interested in her?"

"Neighborhood involves obligation. If you let me have one of your class invitation cards, I'll give it to her. And if she comes, you'll show her some attention, won't you?"

Edith toyed absently with her fork.

"I hope I'm not presuming on your kindness?"

"I don't know but you are," she said artlessly. And then she laughed. "Do tell me more about her. Is she beautiful as a picture?"

"There are all sorts of pictures. I believe the young woman is—now this is entirely confidential—engaged to be married to a young man whom I hope to bring into our class."

"Why, that's a fine idea, Cyril! I'll give you the invitation card on Sunday," said Edith cordially. I'll be as lovely as I know how to be to the girl."

After some music, which was much enjoyed, Mr. Carlton recited the following from "Bible Sunshine":

"Out of our weakness to conscious power,
Wisdom and strength for every hour;
Out of our doubt and sore dismay,
Into the faith for which we pray—
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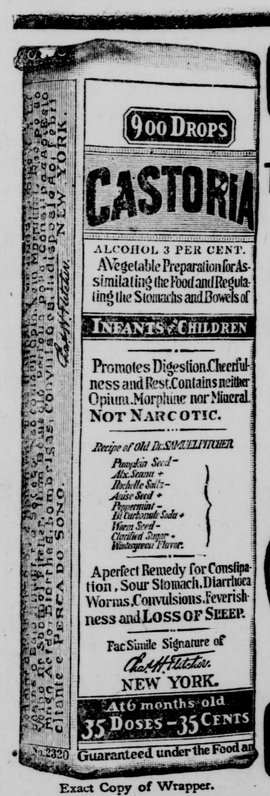

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