



THE BOOKSELLER'S BARGAIN.

BY MARY E. SHEPHERD.

"GOOD morning! Have you Paine's 'Age of Reason' for sale?"

"No," said the bookseller, "I have not. Sorry I cannot oblige you, sir, but we don't keep the book."

"H'm! I am surprised! I should have thought you would. Well, let me see; have you any others of the same class?" And John Huntley ran over a few names.

Mr. Aitkin shook his head.

"No, I have nothing of the kind in stock."

"A nuisance! I want something fresh to read, and I thought I would go in for a little of Paine. I didn't want to go up to town, either; but I suppose I must if you haven't got what I want."

He was turning away when Mr. Aitkin stopped him.

"I have a book here which I expect you have not read," he said. "I sold the fellow to it yesterday for three shillings, but you shall have the loan of it for a week for nothing, Mr. Huntley, if you will promise to read it."

"Very well, I'll promise. Anything fresh'll go down at present, I can assure you. Many thanks!" And Huntley turned back to the counter.

Reaching down a Bible from the shelf behind him, the bookseller placed it in his hands. "This will be a fresh book to you, I know," he said.

"The Bible!" exclaimed Huntley, half inclined to throw it down. "Look here, Aitkin, you've made a fool of me! I didn't look to be taken in like this."

"Nay, I haven't taken you in, lad," said the old man. "You have never read the book through, not even a quarter of it. Come, now!"

"Well, I haven't, I must confess." And John Huntley looked down at the book in his hand. "I don't think I've read more than a bit here and a bit there."

"Well, read it for yourself. Eh, lad, it's a grand book! better than all your infidel books. Just see what it has done for the world; look for yourself and see, and judge it by that. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"

"What has it done?" asked Huntley impatiently. "Made men and women miserable by tormenting them with fears of a hell! That's about all it has done," he said sneeringly.

"Nay! nay! Would you blame the lighthouse for revealing the rocks on which it stands to the sailor? Would you condemn the physician for warning you of a disease which threatens you if you do not take measures to avert it? Would you not rather bless him for his warning?"

"But the Bible does not only *warn*: it gives strength and help," said Mr. Aitkin. "Look here, I want to tell you of something a gentleman told me many years ago. It was told him by a gentleman who personally knew Tom Paine, and was repeatedly in his company during the last years of his life.

"One evening," he said, "I found Paine haranguing a company of his disciples on the great mischief done to society by the introduction of the Bible and Christianity. According to him, it was responsible for fully one half of the evils of mankind. When he paused for a moment I rose up, and said :

" "Mr. Paine, you have been in Scotland ; you know there are no people in the world more rigidly attached to the Bible than the Scotch, no land where it is so carefully read and studied as it is there. I am correct, I believe ?"

" He said it was so.

"I continued: "You have been in Spain and Portugal, where they have no Bible ; and there you can hire a man for a dollar to murder his neighbour, who never gave him any offence. Is not that so ?"

" "Yes," he said ; "you are right."

" "You have seen the manufacturing districts of England, where not one man in fifty can read" (fifty years before this conversation there were no Sunday schools), "and you have been in Ireland, where the majority never saw a Bible ?"

" Paine said nothing, only nodded his head.

" "Now you know it is a fact that *in one county* in England or Ireland there are many more capital convictions in *six months* than there are in the *whole population* of Scotland *in twelve* ! Now, if the Bible were such a bad book as you represent it to be, those who use it would be the worst members of society. But the contrary is the fact, as my figures show.

"Well," said Mr. Aitkin, "Paine didn't answer a single word. The gentleman says: 'It was then about ten o'clock at night. Paine answered not a word, but, taking a candle from the table, he walked out of the room, leaving his friends and myself staring at one another.'"

John Huntley smiled. "There's something in the argument, I admit," he said.

"A great deal, I should say," replied the bookseller. "But look here, lad. Read this book for yourself; don't try and square it to fit *your* notions, either. Just you listen to what it has to say for itself."

"Well, I promised you I would read it, and I will." And with a "Good morning, and many thanks," Huntley left the shop.

The old bookseller stood looking after him as he passed up the street, and many times during that day he did not forget to pray that God would open the eyes of this ignorant and unbelieving man, and reveal to him the "wondrous things out of" His own word.

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John Huntley had no opportunity for beginning his study of the Bible that evening. When he arrived home, he found two or three of his companions there, and the rest of the evening passed in songs and careless merriment. Once or twice he was on the point of telling his comrades of the bargain the bookseller had made with him, but something sealed his lips. They would only laugh at him, he reflected, would say he was a fool to have been caught so. No, he would keep the matter a secret from every one—for the present, at any rate. So the Bible remained in the drawer in his room until the next evening. Then, as soon as closing-time came, Huntley shut his shop and started for his lodgings in the next street of the village. He was the village tailor, and though a young man—not yet twenty-eight—was doing well.

Trade had been pretty brisk that day; and as John fastened the door of the shop and turned off with the key in his hand, he felt unusually elated and self-sufficient. It was a fine evening—the sun had not yet set—and so he decided on taking a little stroll along some of the village lanes. He would start with Aitkin's book before going to bed, he said to himself, his thoughts going back once more to the conversation he had had with the bookseller.

"The Bible, indeed!" he reflected somewhat contemptuously. "After all Aitkin's arguments—his friend's, rather—what has the Bible to do with the prosperity of our country? People are educated now to see the folly of sin, and Christianity has nothing to do with it. Now here am I! If every Bible in the land were burnt

to-morrow, and Christianity and its professors were to vanish from the face of the earth, how much worse should *I* be? And millions more, too? Trade and commerce—ay, and morals, too—would be in as good a state as they are now.”

He stopped, and leaning his arms on the top of a gate, looked away across the fields to where the sun was slowly sinking below the horizon. He watched it for a few minutes until it entirely disappeared.

“It is gone!” involuntarily escaped his lips.

He looked round him. The light seemed as bright as ever; the little birds were still singing, and the sky was full of a dazzling radiance. Indeed it seemed for a while to grow brighter and brighter in the west. He could not have believed that the great orb of day had really gone down behind those far distant hills if he had not seen it for himself. But as he stood looking he saw the twilight gradually steal over the landscape. And as the crimson and purple glories slowly began to fade from the sky, they spoke powerfully to John Huntley as he stood there watching the gathering shadows.

“So would it be *for a time* if all the Bibles were burnt and Christianity torn out, root and branch, from the hearts of men,” they seemed to say to him. “Its influence would still linger for a while; men would love righteousness and would strive to be good. But when all fear of God was destroyed, and men began to lose belief in a future state, then the darkness of moral night would cover the whole world. It would be delayed for a while, as the darkness to-night was delayed by the glory of the sunset, but it would be quite as sure.”

Huntley started, and shook himself, as if he had been suddenly awakened out of sleep.

“Old Aitkin’s talk yesterday has unsettled me,” he said with a half laugh. “Pshaw! I am a fool to have listened to his yarns. I’ve a good mind not to touch that old Bible after all. I’ll go for a good sharp walk; that’ll knock all this nonsense out of my head.”

It was nearly ten o’clock when he arrived at his lodgings. Supper was ready, and in a short time he went upstairs to his room.

"After all, I may as well start to-night," he said to himself. "I've only got a week to do it in, and I promised him I would read it. Besides, I feel better than I did. The book can do *me* no harm."

So taking the Bible from the drawer, he opened it and sat down to read. It opened at the third chapter of Malachi, and as he glanced at it his eye fell on the fifth verse :

"And I will come near to you to judgment ; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not Me, saith the Lord of hosts."

"Against *false* swearers, and against them that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right," repeated John to himself. Was *this* the God whom he had always pictured as being on the side of tyranny and oppression, the God whose delight it was to make His creatures miserable by holding out before them the picture of eternal torment? Was *this* the God of Christianity—the God he hated and would not believe in?

He turned back a few pages. There, at Zechariah vii. 9, 10, he read these words :

"Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute *true* judgment, and show mercy and compassions every man to his brother : And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor ; and let none of you *imagine evil against his brother in your heart.*"

"None of you *imagine* evil," he repeated. "This is a wonderful law." His thoughts flew to the infidel code of rules he had been admiring. What was there in them to compare with this, which demanded such purity of thought?

He turned over the pages once more, and these words in Isaiah met his eye :

"Is not *this* the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"

Like a lightning flash it came to him, the truth that it was to *Christians* the slaves owed their freedom—to such men as Wilberforce and Clarkson, and a host of others.

“Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?” the next verse went on.

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Far on into the night John Huntley sat. His candle had long ago burnt itself out, and had been replaced by another. Eagerly he pored over the book. He had turned to the four gospels, and now sat gazing with wonder at the beauty of the divine Life which shone on him from their pages. Was there ever such a Teacher?

“Wonderful! wonderful!” he exclaimed as he came to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. “I never heard anything like this in my life before.”

And, as he read and read, slowly but surely the conviction grew and fastened on his mind that this Jesus Christ—the Carpenter of Galilee—was divine!

“If there is a God at all—and I believe there is!—Jesus Christ is that God,” he said to himself, as he tossed from side to side on his bed that early morning before sleep would come.

The next day was Sunday. He usually spent most of that day in bed, smoking and reading the newspapers and infidel literature. But to-day the Bible claimed his attention. And, as he read, little by little the sense of his own sinfulness dawned upon him. He saw himself no longer as the respectable, clever tradesman, whose business was increasing, and whose name stood high in the village opinion. No; he was a guilty sinner! He saw the law of God required “truth in the *inward* parts.” Blessed are the *pure in heart*: for *they* shall see God.” He read that “without *holiness* no man shall see the Lord,” and his conscience, awakened, cried out: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

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"Are you busy, Mr. Aitkin? Can I have a word with you?"

"Not at all. Certainly, certainly, my lad! Come inside!" And the old bookseller led the way into the sitting-room behind the shop.

"I feel I am bound to thank you very heartily for the promise you extracted from me," John Huntley said, laying the Bible on the table, and placing its price beside it. "It has been worth its weight in gold, ten times over, to me. Mr. Aitkin, I am a changed man! Through reading that book I have discovered that my so called reasonings are false; and I have also found that I am a sinner, and Jesus Christ is my Saviour."

"Thank God!" said Mr. Aitkin fervently. "Thank God!"

"Yes; thank God!" said John. "I struggled hard to resist the truth, but it conquered. O Mr. Aitkin, I little thought that I should ever *stoop*—as I should have called it—to be saved, should lay aside all my pride and come to Jesus Christ 'as a little child.' How little I ever thought to become a Christian!"

"His ways are not as our ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts," said Mr. Aitkin reverently.