

## THE PENNY TRACT

NOT many years ago, at the time when religious societies began to print tracts, which many thought intended only for the poor, two young ladies were sitting one morning in July, in an arbor in their father's garden.

The weather was clear and fine, and they were shaded from the burning rays of the sun by the honeysuckles which covered the lattice-work of the arbor and shed abroad their sweet smell throughout the garden. These young ladies were not employed in useful works for their own family because their parents were rich and could afford to employ others to work for them, neither were they engaged in working for the poor; for having felt no troubles and wants themselves, they had no feeling for the wants of others. Nor can I give much account of what they were doing, though they had a table before them covered with books and pencils, and work-bags and boxes. Now, while they were thus idling away those precious hours which might have been devoted in so many ways to the service of God, they saw an old man, with a basket on his arm, walk into the garden, and come towards them. He was neatly dressed, and had a grave and decent aspect.

He came up close to the arbor, and making a low bow, said, "Ladies, will you please buy some tracts?"

"Tracts," repeated the elder of the sisters, "What are they? But I see," added she, "You go about retailing two-penny books and songs up and down the country. No doubt your basket is full of all manner of wicked trash. Such persons as you do great mischief, and ought to be taken up and punished."

"Lady," said the old man, meekly, "If you will be pleased to look at my books, you will find that they are not such as you speak of. There was a time, I will honestly say, when I got my bread by selling such profane books and ballads as you allude to; but about three years ago, I met with a godly lady who laid before me the wretchedness of my way of life. This lady told me that I should be doing less harm if I were to go about poisoning every brook and fountain in the land, than I did in retailing such writings as infused poison into the heart. Those were her very words. I should never forget them if I were to

live to be a hundred years old; and she had the kindness to direct me to a place where I could get religious tracts and sacred songs for sale; so I followed her advice, and have pursued the trade ever since.”

Having thus spoken, the old man took a few of his best tracts out of his basket, and offered them to the young lady.

“And what are we to do with them?” said she, carelessly glancing her eye upon them, as the old man held them before her.

“Read them, if you please, and then give them to your neighbours or your servants, lady, if you have no further use for them yourself,” answered the man.

“Our neighbours,” replied she, “I suspect, would not thank us for them.”

“Lady,” said the old man gravely, “These books contain many holy words.”

“Very likely,” she answered; “but if no one reads those holy words, who will be the better for them?”

“And wherefore should you suppose, lady,” asked he, “that no one will read them? I have been employed in selling books of this kind for three years, and I know that many read them, and take great delight in them; and I have actually known several who have gone without a meal to procure one of them.”

“I see,” said the younger sister, “That you understand your business; your books will not lie in your basket for want of your word, at any rate.”

“Lady,” replied the old man, “I do not offer you such wares as you cannot form a judgment of yourselves; only read one or two of my tracts, and if you approve of their contents, bestow them upon your neighbours. They will assuredly read them; and if you do not presently see the good effects of your kindness, they may, nevertheless, appear hereafter; for it is written, ‘Cast thy bread upon the waters, and thou shalt find it after many days.’” (Ecclesiastes 11:1)

The young ladies seemed inclined to be diverted by every thing the old man said; and one of them happening to have a penny in her netting box, tossed it carelessly into his basket, saying that she hoped to have one of his best articles in return. The old man took the penny in his hand, and setting his basket down, chose one of his best tracts,

the title of which was the *Day of Judgment*, which he placed on the table, and taking up the basket, walked away.

The young ladies had amused themselves some minutes with laughing at the old man and his tracts, when a miserable, ragged woman, carrying a sickly infant in her arms, presented herself at the garden-gate, and began to ask alms in a whining and sorrowful voice. The young ladies were too much engaged with their own idle and merry conceits to observe this poor woman, who opened the gate and came, up the gravel-walk towards the arbor.

As soon as the sisters perceived her, they screamed as if they had been frightened, and then laughed at their own ridiculous fears. The poor woman, who was too much taken up by her own distresses to regard either the affected screams or the laughter of the young people, now renewed her entreaties for charity; upon which the elder lady tossed her sixpence, and the other, looking archly at her sister, held out the newly purchased tract to the beggar, saying, "There, take that home; it is to do you a vast deal of good; how much, I cannot tell you."

The poor woman received the little book as seriously as she supposed it had been offered to her, but said, "I cannot read, miss, more is the pity; but my husband is an extraordinary good scholar." "Oh, then, that little book will be the very thing for him," said the giddy girl; "So, be sure to give it to him."

The poor woman, as I have before remarked, was by no means aware that these young ladies were jesting with her; but if she had been, it ought to have made no difference in her opinion of the value of the tract; for that which is good would remain good still, though all the world were to unite in saying it is naught; and that which is evil would be evil still, though earth and hell were joined to say it is not so; therefore those will assuredly be confounded and brought to shame at last who call good evil, and evil good. (Isaiah 5:20)

Now, this little book which the lady had put into the hand of the beggar was full of precious matter, and many rich quotations from the word of God. And as the prophet Elijah did not find the meat which the Lord sent him in the wilderness less acceptable because it was brought to him by the ravens rather than the doves, neither did this little volume lose aught of its real value by passing into the pos-

session of the beggar through profane hands. But to leave these reflections, and return to my story.

The poor woman was so well pleased with what she had obtained from these ladies, that she made her best courtesy and turned her steps towards her miserable home; but as she begged at the door of every house she passed by the way, it was towards evening before she reached her cottage. The dwelling of this poor woman was a house, on the borders of a common, which had been originally well built, was sufficiently roomy, and stood in a spacious patch of ground, where several fruit-trees remained; but notwithstanding all those advantages, the idleness and vice of its present owner had rendered this place a scene of ruin and desolation. The garden had been so long neglected that it had become a wilderness; the broken windows were stuffed with rags; part of the chimney had fallen; the thatch was out of repair; and in short, every thing within and without this miserable habitation bespoke the poverty, slovenliness, and idleness of its inhabitants. The name of the man who possessed this tenement was Francis Downes, the husband of the poor beggar-woman before mentioned.

He was an excellent workman when he chose to work, and pretended to make a living by cutting fruit-trees and jobbing about in different gardens; but these were only pretences; for what he gained in these honest ways was a mere trifle, while the greater part of his livelihood was in fact obtained by fishing and pilfering. This man, about four years before, had married a servant-maid in a farm-house. The woman was a poor, ignorant, simple woman, who might, in good hands, have made a quiet, tidy wife; but she was by no means fit to have to do with such a man as Frank Downes.

This poor woman he had often reduced to the extremities of want: for as his gains were uncertain, his whole life was a round of feasts and fasts, days of riot and long periods of distress and penury. Poor Mary Downes felt her misery, but did not know how to set about mending her situation, for she was ignorant of her duties as a good housewife or prudent mother; and it was not likely that she should acquire the knowledge of these duties with a man who kept her in a constant state of fear and distress of mind.

With respect to religion, she knew about as much as was generally known by the lower orders of servants in farm-houses in England; and that, I am sorry to say, was generally little enough.

Since her unhappy marriage, she had laid one of her little ones in its grave; and she was often much distressed by the sickly appearance of the child she carried in her arms; for though helpless and ignorant, she was a tender mother.

About a week before the time of which I am speaking, Francis Downes had sprained his ankle in one of his nightly excursions, and having been, in consequence, closely confined at home, and unable to work, he, had made the house appear to his wife more wretched than ever. They had also, at this time, been reduced to such distress — as they had no credit, and never could contrive to have a penny beforehand — that they had no resource left but to beg. The poor woman had suffered so much ever since her husband had been confined at home by his harsh and cruel usage, that she was not sorry to get out of his way for a short time, though it were for the purpose of picking up a few pence or a little broken meat by begging; and being, as I have before remarked, extremely ignorant, and simple, she had no idea of the disgracefulness of endeavouring to remove her distress in this way. She had been begging several days in different directions with little success, but on the day of which we are now speaking she was more fortunate and returned home very well satisfied with what she had acquired.

Francis Downes was sitting at the door, cutting a cork to make a float for his fishing-line, when he saw his wife come up to the gate. He saluted her, as his usual custom was, with an oath or some abusive epithet; and asking her where she had been lugging the child, demanded what she had brought back with her.

“More than you deserve,” she answered, with more spirit than usual, showing him a quantity of broken meat which she had fastened up in her apron, and a few halfpence tied up in an old rag. As to the silver sixpence which the ladies had given her, she kept that for herself and child at some future time of need. The man was well satisfied with what his wife had obtained, and getting up and hobbling into the house, he heaped a few sticks on the fire, and sat down with her to sup on what she had brought.

While they were enjoying their food, for they were very hungry, the wife bethought herself of the book; and taking it from her pocket she gave it to her husband, repeating the lady's words.

He laid down a bone which he was picking, and taking the book between his finger and thumb, he looked at the title, shook his head, and then dexterously tossed the tract from him upon a dresser at the other end of the room, and would no doubt have thrown it further, could he have done so without getting up

"Don't you like it, Frank?" said his wife. "Why, what's it about, that you are so angry with it?" asked she; "What's the subject of it?"

"No matter," replied the man; "At any rate, it is no business of yours."

The poor woman did not dare to ask any more questions about the book, though she still felt some respect for it, from what the ladies had said. Accordingly, when she was putting away the things after they had done their supper, she took the tract from the upper part of the dresser and put it into one of the drawers.

The next day Frank Downes, being tired of staying at home, thought he might make out to hobble to a pond which was in a wood not far off, to lay lines for fishing. Accordingly, he set out about five in the morning, but coming to an uneven part of the common, he stumbled and fell, and spraining his ankle a second time, lay in dreadful pain, till a carter, passing by with an empty cart, had the charity to take him up and carry him home. His wife had some trouble to get him to bed, and he groaned dreadfully with the pain, while an old neighbour bathed his ankle. The pain after a while was much less; but his foot remained so swollen and weak, that it was necessary for him to be constantly upon his bed. He was now, therefore, forced to make up his mind to stay at home, while he sent his wife again about the country to pick up what she could get by begging.

The first day of her absence he strove to amuse himself with mending his fishing tackle, and in this manner he passed the time till his wife came back; but the next day he could find no such handy job, and he lay from seven o'clock in the morning, at which time she went out, quite alone, and having nothing but his own thoughts to amuse him.

Now, unless a man enjoys peace with God through the blood and merits of his dying Saviour, it is seldom that he can find much satisfaction in discoursing with his own thoughts. These indeed were companions of whom Frank Downes was never very fond and they were particularly disagreeable to him now, when he considered into what a situation he had brought himself. At length, being unable to bear his own reflections any longer, he got up, and hobbling to the dresser, he opened the very drawer into which his wife had put the tract. In this drawer Frank Downes used to keep a roll of old ballads, with which he thought he might now pass a little time.

The drawer, besides the tract so often mentioned, contained an assortment of dirty rags, combs, and onions, with such other stores of the like nature as negligent housewives are apt to collect in the drawers of dressers and other convenient repositories.

Frank Downes turned this rubbish over and over with one hand, while, in order to ease his lame foot, he leaned on the dresser with the other, but all in vain: the ballads could not be found. At length, cursing his wife for her carelessness, and looking round almost in despair for something with which he might pass away the time, his eye again fell upon the tract which lay in the drawer; and though his hand had rejected it several times while looking for the ballads, and notwithstanding the title was very far from being tempting to such a man as he then was, yet so hard pressed was he for something to do, that he took it up, and hobbling in great pain back to his bed, he threw himself down again in a very ill humour.

Frank Downes lay for a while without looking at the little book which he held in his hand; but finding his thoughts again getting very troublesome, he at length had recourse to it. The tract was written in a plain manner, and gave a simple account of man's fall, and of his redemption by God the Son. It also spoke of man's depravity, and of the manner in which his heart is changed and purified by the Holy Spirit.

Much also was to be found in this little book upon that grand and delightful subject, the love of God the Father for His creatures; and this affecting question and answer was put, "Which among you would give his son to die for his friend? Yet God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to die for it, even when it lay in

open rebellion against Him." It also treated of the Day of Judgment, of heaven and hell, and pointed out somewhat more largely how one might be obtained and the other avoided.

In short, this little book contained much divine wisdom; and had it been valued at a thousand guineas instead of a penny, it would have been rated infinitely below its value; that is, if we consider the good that it was the means, under Providence, of conveying to the soul of the poor sinner.

Frank Downes was a ready reader, and therefore he was no great time in perusing the little treatise from beginning to end; and when he had finished it, he threw it from him, using at the same time one of his profane expressions. But although the poor man could throw away the book, it was well for him that he could not so easily throw away the ideas which the book had just put into his head, though he did his utmost to get rid of them.

Nevertheless, they worked upon him in such a way, that he presently became, as it were, like a raging lion, and the weariness of his mind was, in comparison, far greater than the pain of his ankle.

It was more than three years from the time when my story began, that the same two young ladies of whom I first spoke were walking one fine summer's evening on the borders of the common on which Frank Downes' house was situated. Since that period in which they were sitting in the arbor they had had many troubles, and were at the present time in deep mourning for their father. They were therefore not now, as formerly, disposed to laugh at everything they heard and saw, but were prepared, through the divine blessing on their afflictions, to receive better impressions. So they walked on till they came to Francis Downes' cottage.

I have described the appearance of this place before its owner became a Christian; and I will now endeavour to picture it to my reader again, after that happy event had taken place. And first, the thatch, which had been faulty in many places, was neatly repaired, and the rags and paper taken out of the window and in their places were whole and clean panes of glass. The garden, too, which had looked like a wilderness, was now neatly laid out, and abounded with common fruits and vegetables; the little wicket, which had formerly scarce held together, though fastened by wisps of straw, was repaired

and standing upright, and the path which led from thence to the house door neatly laid with pebbles.

When the two ladies came up to the wicket and looked over it into the garden, they expressed some surprise at the neat and thriving appearance of all about the house, and one said to the other, "Is not this the place whose wretched appearance we always remarked whenever we came this way?"

"Let us go in," replied the other, and inquire into this extraordinary amendment perhaps the house has changed its inhabitants."

Accordingly, the two young ladies went up to the house, and knocking at the door, it was presently opened by a decent looking woman with one child in her arms, and another following her. The ladies looked at the cottager, and she at them for a few moments, before they recollected each other. At length one of the sisters said, "Surely you cannot be the person who some time ago came begging to our house with a child in your arms — a person to whom I gave a book?"

Indeed, indeed, ladies, I am," said the woman, smiling; "And I have reason to remember that day to the last hour of my life."

The woman then invited the young ladies to come into her neat kitchen, where, setting them each a chair, she told them what a wonderful work the book which they had sent her husband had, through the divine blessing, wrought in him, and how his heart had been changed, and his conduct to her so much amended, that from being the most miserable of women, she had now become one of the happiest; "For ladies," said she, "When I was so ill used by my husband, and saw my poor child pining for want, I had no heart to set my house to rights, or mend and wash my clothes; and as to religion, I could not read, and knew nothing about it, nor was likely to know, for I never set my foot in a place of worship; and such was my ignorance, that when I laid my eldest boy in his grave, I was quite without comfort respecting him, and was ready almost to lay myself on the cold earth by his side. But now that it has pleased the Lord to change the heart of my husband, and to put it into his mind to teach me my duty to God, and to read from His precious word, I go about my work as it were with a new heart. I have even seen reason to rejoice in that which at one time brought me almost to despair — I

mean the death of my little darling — inasmuch as I am now convinced that all is ordered and directed by our heavenly Father for the good of His people.” “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28) I now know also that I have the assurance of seeing him again.”

Here the woman burst into tears, but they were tears of joy; and as she wiped them away with her apron, she gave such a look to the ladies as spoke her feeling of the obligations she owed them. I cannot describe what these ladies felt on this occasion, but they looked at each other, and one said to the other, “I now remember the words of that good old man who sold the tract to us, ‘Cast thy bread upon the waters, and thou shalt find it after many days;’ but we can take no credit to ourselves on this occasion, we must give all the glory to God.”

And turning towards the woman she said, “May we have the tract again to read for we ourselves see the need to know better the precious Word of God which can change lives.”

Now, I do not pretend to say that every one who gives away a Bible or tract, or other good book, will always be made so sensible as those ladies were of the good he has been allowed to bring to pass, and perhaps it would not be well for him if he were. Nevertheless, of this we are assured, that if we labour in disseminating the word of God and the principles of true religion, our work will not be without effect; for it is written in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 55:10-11:

“For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; so shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper the thing whereto I sent it.”`



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