



The Young Cottager

LEGH RICHMOND (1772-1825)

THE YOUNG COTTAGER

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THE YOUNG COTTAGER

JANE S. was the daughter of poor parents in the village where it pleased God first to cast my lot in the ministry. My acquaintance with her commenced when she was twelve years of age by her weekly attendance at my house amongst a number of children whom I invited and regularly instructed every Saturday afternoon.

Catechizing the Children

They used to read [and] repeat catechisms, psalms, hymns, and portions of Scripture. I accustomed them also to pass a kind of free conversational examination, according to their age and ability, in those subjects by which I hoped to see them made wise unto salvation.

On the summer evenings, I frequently used to assemble this little group out of doors in my garden, sitting under the shade of some trees which protected us from the heat of the sun. From hence, a scene appeared which rendered my occupation the more interesting. For adjoining the spot where we sat, and only separated from us by a fence, was the churchyard, surrounded with beautiful prospects in every direction. There lay the mortal remains of thousands, who from age to age in their different generations had been successively committed to the grave—"earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."¹ Here the once-famed ancestors of the rich and the less known forefathers of the poor lay mingling their dust together, alike waiting the resurrection from the dead.

I had not far to look for subjects of warning and exhortation suitable to my little flock of lambs that I was feeding. I could point to the heaving sods that marked the different graves and separated them from each other and tell my pupils that, young as they were, none of them were too young to die; and that probably more than half of the bodies which were buried there were those of little children. I hence took occasion to speak of the nature and value of a soul, and to ask them where they expected their souls to go when they departed hence and were no more seen upon earth.

¹ A phrase from the funeral service in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.

I told them Who was “the resurrection, and the life” and Who alone could take away the sting of death (Joh 11:25; 1Co 15:55-57). I used to remind them that the hour was “coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (Joh 5:28-29). I often availed myself of these opportunities to call to their recollection the more recent deaths of their own relatives that lay buried so near us. Some had lost a parent, others a brother or sister. Some perhaps had lost all these and were committed to the mercy of their neighbors as fatherless or motherless orphans. Such circumstances were occasionally useful to excite tender emotions, favorable to serious impressions.

Sometimes I sent the children to the various stones which stood at the head of the graves and bid them learn the epitaphs inscribed upon them. I took pleasure in seeing the little ones thus dispersed in the churchyard, each committing to memory a few verses written in commemoration of the departed. They would soon accomplish the desired object and eagerly return to me, ambitious to repeat their task. Thus my churchyard became a book of instruction, and every gravestone a leaf of edification for my young disciples.

The church itself stood in the midst of the ground. It was a spacious antique structure. Within those very walls I first proclaimed the message of God to sinners. As these children surrounded me, I sometimes pointed to the church, spoke to them of the nature of public worship, the value of the Sabbath, the duty of regular attendance on its services, and urged their serious attention to the means of grace.² I showed them the sad state of many countries, where neither churches nor Bibles were known, and the no less melancholy condition of multitudes at home who sinfully neglect worship and slight the Word of God. [I] thus tried to make them sensible of their own favors and privileges.

² **means of grace** – the instruments which God is pleased to use in order to accomplish salvation and sanctification in the heart of men: the preaching of the Word, Bible reading and study, prayer, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and godly fellowship with others.

First Impressions of Jane

Little Jane used constantly to appear on these weekly seasons of instruction. I made no very particular observations concerning her during the first twelve months or more after her commencement of attendance. She was not then remarkable for any peculiar attainment. On the whole I used to think her rather slower of apprehension than most of her companions. She usually repeated her tasks correctly but was seldom able to make answers to questions for which she was not previously prepared with replies. Her countenance was not engaging; her eye discovered no remarkable liveliness. She read tolerably well, took pains, and improved in it. Mildness and quietness marked her general demeanor. She was very constant in her attendance on public worship at the church as well as on my Saturday instruction at home. But generally speaking she was little noticed except for her regular and orderly conduct. Had I then been asked of which of my young scholars I had formed the most favorable opinion, poor Jane might have been altogether omitted in the list.

How little do we oftentimes know what God is doing in other people's hearts! What poor calculators and judges we frequently prove till He opens our eyes! His thoughts are not our thoughts; neither our ways His ways (Isa 55:8). Once, indeed, during the latter part of that year, I was struck with her ready attention to my wishes. I had, agreeably to the plan above mentioned, sent her into the churchyard to commit to memory an epitaph which I admired. On her return she told me that, in addition to what I desired, she had also learned another which was inscribed on an adjoining stone, adding that she thought it a very pretty one. I thought so too, and perhaps my readers will be of the same opinion. Little Jane, though dead, yet shall speak. While I transcribe the lines I can powerfully imagine that I hear her voice repeating them. The idea is exceedingly gratifying to me.

*Forgive, blest shade,³ the tributary tear
That mourns thy exit from a world like this.
Forgive the wish that would have kept thee here
And stayed thy progress to the seats of bliss.
No more confined to groveling scenes of night,
No more a tenant pent in mortal clay,*

³ **shade** – spirit of a dead person.

*Now should we rather hail thy glorious flight
And trace thy journey to the realms of day.*

The above was her appointed task; and the other which she voluntarily learned and spoke of with pleasure is this:

*It must be so—our father Adam's fall
And disobedience brought this lot on all.
All die in him—but hopeless should we be,
Blest revelation, were it not for thee.*

*Hail, glorious gospel, heavenly light, whereby
We live with comfort and with comfort die
And view beyond this gloomy scene, the tomb,
A life of endless happiness to come.*

I afterwards discovered that the sentiment expressed in the latter epitaph had much affected her, but at the period of this little incident I knew nothing of her mind. I had comparatively overlooked her.

I have often been sorry for it since. Conscience seemed to rebuke me when I afterwards discovered what the Lord had been doing for her soul, as if I had neglected her; yet it was not done designedly. She was unknown to us all, except that, as I have since found out, her regularity and abstinence from the sins and follies of her young equals in age and station brought upon her many taunts and jeers from others which she bore very meekly.

He Learns of Her Illness

It was about fifteen months from the first period of Jane's attendance on my Saturday school when I missed her from her customary place. Two or three weeks had gone by without my making any particular enquiry respecting her. I was at length informed that she was not well; but apprehending no peculiar cause for alarm, nearly two months passed away without any further mention of her name being made. At length a poor old woman in the village, of whose religious disposition I had formed a good opinion, came and said to me, "Sir, have you not missed Jane S. at your house on Saturday afternoons?"

"Yes," I replied, "I believe she is not well."

"Nor ever will be, I fear," said the woman.

“What! Do you apprehend any danger in the case?”

“Sir, she is very poorly indeed, and I think is in a decline. She wants to see you, sir, but is afraid you would not come to see such a poor, young child as she is.”

“Not go where poverty and sickness may call me? How can she imagine so? At which house does she live?”

“Sir, it is a poor place, and she is ashamed to ask you to come there. Her near neighbors are noisy, wicked people, and her own father and mother are strange folks. They all make game at poor Jenny because she reads her Bible so much.”

“Do not tell me about poor places and wicked people. That is the very situation where a minister of the gospel is called to do the most good. I shall go to see her; you may let her know my intention.”

“I will, sir. I go in most days to speak to her, and it does one’s heart good to hear her talk.”

“Indeed!” said I. “What does she talk about?”

“Talk about, poor thing! Why, nothing but good things such as the Bible and Jesus Christ and life and death and her soul and heaven and hell and your discourses and the books you used to teach her, sir. Her father says he’ll have no such godly things in his house, and her own mother scoffs at her and says she supposes Jenny counts herself better than other folks. But she does not mind all that. She will read her books, and then talk so pretty to her mother and beg that she would think about her soul.”

“The Lord forgive me,” thought I, “for not being more attentive to this poor child’s case.” I seemed to feel the importance of infantine instruction more than ever I had done before and felt a rising hope that this girl might prove a kind of first-fruits of my labors. “I hope, I really hope,” said I, “this dear child will prove a true child of God. And if so, what a mercy to her, and what a mercy for me!”

First Visit

The next morning I went to see the child. Her dwelling was of the humblest kind. It stood against a high bank of earth which formed a sort of garden behind it. The front aspect of the cottage was chiefly rendered pleasing by a honeysuckle which luxuriantly climbed up the wall. As I

entered the house door, its flowers put forth a very sweet and refreshing smell. Intent on the object of my visit, I at the same moment offered up silent prayer to God and entertained a hope that the welcome fragrance of the shrub might be illustrative of that all-prevailing intercession of a Redeemer, which I trusted was, in the case of this little child, as “a sweetsmelling savour” to her heavenly Father (Eph 5:2). The very flowers and leaves of the garden and field are emblematical of higher things when grace teaches us to make them so.

Jane was in bed upstairs. I found no one in the house with her except the woman who had brought me the message on the evening before. The instant I looked on the girl I perceived a very marked change in her countenance. It had acquired the consumptive hue, both white and red. A delicacy unknown to it before quite surprised me, owing to the alteration it produced in her look. She received me first with a very sweet smile and then instantly burst into a flood of tears, just sobbing out, “I am so glad to see you, sir.”

“I am very much concerned at your being so ill, my child, and grieved that I was not sooner aware of your state. But I hope the Lord designs it for your good.”

Her eye, not her tongue, powerfully expressed, “I hope and think He does.”

“Well, my poor child, since you can no longer come to see me, I will come and see you, and we will talk over the subjects which I have been used to explain to you.”

“Indeed, sir, I shall be so glad.”

“That I believe she will,” said the woman, “for she loves to talk of nothing so much as what she has heard you say in your sermons and in the books you have given her.”

“Are you really desirous, my dear child, to be a true Christian?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, sir. I am sure that I desire that above all things.” I was astonished and delighted at the earnestness and simplicity with which she spoke these words. “Sir,” added she, “I have been thinking as I lay on my bed for many weeks past how good you are to instruct us poor children. What must become of us without it?”

"I am truly glad that my instructions have not been lost upon you, and pray God that this your present sickness may be an instrument of blessing in His hands, to prove, humble, and sanctify you. My dear child, you have a soul, an immortal soul, to think of. You remember what I have often said to you about the value of a soul: 'What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'" (Mar 8:36).

"Yes, sir. I remember well you told us that when our bodies are put into the grave, our souls will then go either to the good or the bad place."

"And to which of these places do you think that, as a sinner in the sight of God, you deserve to go?"

"To the bad one, sir."

"What? To everlasting destruction?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why so?"

"Because I am a great sinner."

"And must all great sinners go to hell?"

"They all deserve it, and I am sure I do."

"But is there no way of escape? Is there no way for a great sinner to be saved?"

"Yes, sir. Christ is the Savior."

"And whom does He save?"

"All believers."

"And do you believe in Christ yourself?"

"I do not know, sir. I wish I did; but I feel that I love Him."

"What do you love Him for?"

"Because He is good to poor children's souls like mine."

"What has He done for you?"

"He died for me, sir; and what could He do more?"

"And what do you hope to gain by His death?"

"A good place when I die if I believe in Him and love Him."

"Have you felt any uneasiness on account of your soul?"

"Oh yes, sir, a great deal. When you used to talk to us children on Saturdays I often felt as if I could hardly bear it and wondered that others could seem careless. I thought I was not fit to die. I thought of all the bad

things I had ever done and said, and believed God must be *very* angry with me; for you often told us that God would not be mocked and that Christ said if we were not converted we could not go to heaven (Gal 6:7; Mat 18:3). Sometimes I thought I was so young it did not signify;⁴ and then again, it seemed to me a great sin to think so. I could see that my heart was not right; and how could such a heart be fit for heaven? Indeed, sir, I used to feel *very* uneasy.”

“My dear Jenny, I wish I had known all this before. Why did you never tell me about it?”

“Sir, I durst not. Indeed, I could not well say what was the matter with me; and I thought you would look upon me as very bold if I had spoken about myself to such a gentleman as you. Yet I often wished that you knew what I felt and feared. Sometimes, as we went away from your house, I could not help crying; and then the other children laughed and jeered at me and said I was going to be very good, they supposed, or at least [going] to make people think so. Sometimes, sir, I fancied you did not think so well of me as of the rest and that hurt me; yet I knew I deserved no particular favor because I was the chief of sinners.”

“My dear, what made St. Paul say he was the chief of sinners? Can you repeat the verse?”

“‘This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ (1Ti 1:15). Is not that right, sir?”

“Yes, my child, it is right; remember now and for evermore that Christ came into the world to save the chief of sinners.”

“Sir, I am so glad He did. It makes me hope that He will save me though I am a poor, sinful girl. Sir, I am very ill, and I do not think I shall ever get well again. I want to go to Christ if I die.”

“Go to Christ while you live, my dear child, and He will not cast you away when you die. He said, ‘Suffer little children to come unto Me,’ waits to be gracious to them, and forbids them not (Luk 18:16; Isa 30:18). What made you think so seriously about the state of your soul?”

“Your talking about the graves in the churchyard and telling us how many young children were buried there. I remember you said one day nearly twelve months ago, ‘Children, where will you be a hundred years

⁴ **signify** – have importance.

hence? Children, where do you think you shall go when you die? Children, if you were to die tonight, are you sure you should go to Christ and be happy? Sir, I shall never forget your saying 'children' three times together in that solemn way."

"Did you ever before that day feel any desire about your soul?"

"Yes, sir. I think I first had that desire almost as soon as you began to teach us on Saturday afternoons, but on that day I felt as I never did before. I shall never forget it. All the way as I went home and all that night these words were in my thoughts: 'Children, where do you think you shall go when you die?' I thought I must leave off all my bad ways, or where shall I go when I die?"

"And what effect did these thoughts produce in your mind?"

"Sir, I tried to live better, and I did leave off many bad ways. But the more I strove, the more difficult I found it. My heart seemed so hard, and then I could not tell anyone my case."

"Could not you tell it to the Lord Who hears and answers prayers?"

"My prayers"—here she blushed and sighed—"are very poor at the best, and at that time I scarcely knew how to pray at all as I ought. But I did sometimes ask the Lord for a better heart."

There was a character in all this conversation which marked a truly sincere and enlightened state of mind. She spoke with all the simplicity of a child and yet the seriousness of a Christian. I could scarcely persuade myself that she was the same girl. Her countenance was filled with interesting affections and always spoke much more than her tongue could utter. She now possessed an ease and liberty in speaking to which she had formerly been a stranger. The marks of a divine change were too prominent to be easily mistaken, and in this very child I for the first time witnessed the evident testimonies of such a change.

"Sir," continued little Jane, "I had one day been thinking that I was neither fit to live nor die; for I could find no comfort in this world, and I was sure I deserved none in the other. On that day you sent me to learn the verse on Mrs. B.'s headstone, and then I read that on the one next to it."

"I very well remember, Jenny. You came back and repeated them both to me."

"There were two lines which abode with me."

“Which were they?”

*“Hail glorious gospel, heavenly light, whereby
We live with comfort, and with comfort die.”*

“I wished that glorious gospel was mine that I might live and die with comfort, and it seemed as if I thought it might be so. I never felt so happy in all my life before.”

“My dear child, what is the meaning of the word *gospel*?”

“Good news.”

“Good news for whom?”

“For wicked sinners, sir.”

“Who sends this good news for wicked sinners?”

“The Lord Almighty.”

“And who brings this good news?”

“Sir, you brought it to me.”

Here my soul melted in an instant, and I could not repress the tears. The last answer was equally unexpected and affecting. I felt a father’s tenderness and gratitude for a new and first-born child. Jane wept likewise. After a little pause, she said, “Oh, sir, I wish you would speak to my father and mother and little brother, for I am afraid they are going on very badly.” I then prayed with the child and promised to visit her constantly.

Her Illness Continues

Little Jane’s illness was of a lingering nature. I often visited her. At one visit I found her in bed reading Dr. Watts’ hymns for children.⁵ “What are you reading this morning, Jane?”

“Sir, I have been thinking very much about some verses. Here they are:

*“There is an hour when I must die,
Nor do I know how soon twill come.
A thousand children young as I
Are called by death to hear their doom.”*

⁵ *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* by Isaac Watts.

*Let me improve the hours I have
Before the day of grace is fled;
There's no repentance in the grave
Nor pardon offered to the dead.*

“Sir, I feel all that to be very true, and I am afraid I do not improve the hours as I ought to do. I think I shall not live very long; and when I remember my sins, I say:

*“Lord, at Thy feet, ashamed I lie;
Upward I dare not look.
Pardon my sins before I die
And blot them from Thy book.*

“Do you think He will pardon me, sir.”

“My dear child, I have great hopes that He has pardoned you, that He has heard your prayers, and put you into the number of His true children already.”

“Thank you, sir. I do so love to hear of these things. And I think, sir, I should not love them so much if I had no part in them...”⁶

Disease was making rapid inroads upon her, and she was aware of it. But as the outward man decayed, she was strengthened with might by God's Spirit in the inner man (2Co 4:16). She was evidently ripening fast for a better world.

The next morning I went to Jane's cottage. On entering the door, the woman who so frequently visited her met me and said, “Perhaps, sir, you will not wake her just yet; for she has dropped asleep, and she seldom gets much rest, poor girl!”

I went gently upstairs. The child was in a half-sitting posture with her Bible open before her. She had evidently fallen asleep while reading. I approached without waking her and observed that she had been reading the twenty-third chapter of St. Luke. The finger of her left hand lay upon the book pointing at these words: “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luk 23:42). Is this casual or designed, thought I. Either way it is remarkable.

⁶ A portion of the account relating a communion service held in the home has been omitted.

She half awoke from her dozing state, but not sufficiently to perceive that any person was present and said in a kind of whisper: "Lord, remember me. Remember me; remember. Remember a poor child. Lord, remember me." She then suddenly started and perceived me as she became fully awake. "Dame K., how long have I been asleep? Sir, I am very sorry."

"And I am very glad to find you thus," I replied. "What were you reading?"

"The history of the crucifying of Jesus, sir."

"How far had you read when you fell asleep?"

"To the prayer of the thief that was crucified with Him and thought what a mercy it would be if the Lord Jesus should remember me likewise. And so I fell asleep, and I fancied in my dream that I saw Christ upon the cross. And I thought I said, 'Lord, remember me,' and I am sure He did not look angry upon me"...

The countenance and manner of the child evinced powerful feelings. Tears mingled with smiles, resignation brightened by hope, humility animated by faith, a childlike modesty adorned with the understanding of a riper age, gratitude, peace, devotion, patience—all these were visible...

"Sir," said the child, "I wish you could speak to my mother when you come again. I am so grieved about her soul, and I am afraid she cares nothing at all about it herself."

"I hope I shall have an opportunity the next time I come. Farewell, my child."

"Goodbye, sir, and I thank you for all your kindness to me."

"Surely," I thought as I left the cottage, "this young bud of grace will bloom beauteously in paradise! The Lord transplant her thither in His own good time."

Her Passing

At a very early hour one morning I was awakened by a messenger bringing an urgent request that I would immediately go to the child as her end appeared to be just approaching. On arriving at the house, I found no one below. I paused for a few minutes and heard the girl's voice very faintly saying: "Do you think he will come? I should be so very glad to see him before I die."

I ascended the stairs. Her father, mother, brother, and the elderly woman before spoken of were in the chamber. Jane's countenance bore the marks of speedy dissolution. The moment she saw me, a renewed vigor beamed in her eye. Grateful affection sparkled in the dying face. For some time she was silent but never took her eyes off me. At length she said, "This is very kind, sir. I am going fast. I was afraid I should never see you again in this world."

I said, "My child, are you resigned to die?"

"Quite."

"Where is your hope?"

She lifted up her finger, pointed to heaven and then directed the same downward to her own heart, saying successively as she did so, "Christ there, and Christ here." These words, accompanied by the action, spoke her meaning more solemnly than can easily be conceived.

A momentary spasm took place. To her weeping mother she said, "I am very cold, but it is no matter. It will soon be over." Then she said to me, "I wish, sir, when I am gone you would tell the children of the parish how good the Lord has been to me, a poor sinner. Tell them that they who seek Him early will find Him (Pro 8:17). Tell them that the ways of sin and ignorance are the ways to ruin and hell. And pray, tell them from me, sir, that Christ is indeed 'the way, the truth, and the life' (Joh 14:6). He will in no wise cast out any that come" (Joh 6:37).

"My dear child, you will soon be for ever in His arms Who is now guiding you by His rod and staff through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psa 23:4).

"I believe so; indeed, I do," said she. "I long to be with Him. Jesus, save me. Help me through this last trial."

She then gave one hand to her father, the other to her mother, and said, "God bless you. God bless you! Seek the Lord. You cannot know what I have felt for both of you. Lord, pardon and save my dear father and mother." She then took hold of her brother's hand, saying: "Thomas, I beg you to leave off your bad ways. Read the Bible. I give you mine. May the Lord turn your heart to love and follow Him." To the other woman she said, "I thank you, Dame K., for all your kindness since I have been ill. I hope the Lord will remember you for it, according to His rich mercy."

“Ah, my child,” said the woman, “I wish I was as fit to die as you are, but I fear that will never be. My sins have been many, very many.”

“Christ’s blood cleanseth from all sin,” said the child (1Jo 1:7).

She turned to me with a look of surprising earnestness and animation, saying, “You, sir, have been my best friend on earth. You have taught me the way to heaven, and I love and thank you for it. You have spoken to me of the love of Christ, and He has made me to feel it in my heart. I shall see Him face to face. He will never leave me nor forsake me. He is the same and changes not. Dear sir, God bless you.”

The child suddenly rose up with an unexpected exertion, threw her livid, wasted arms around me as I sat on the bedside, laid her head on my shoulder and said distinctly, “God bless and reward you. Give thanks for me to Him. My soul is saved. Christ is everything to me. Sir, we shall meet in heaven; shall we not?”

“Oh yes. Yes, then all will be peace, peace, peace.”

She sank back on the bed, and spoke no more, fetched a deep sigh, smiled, and died.

The angels who rejoiced over her when her soul first turned to God have now carried her triumphantly to the heavenly hills and have already taught her to join “in holy song, their own immortal strains.”

O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name:
make known his deeds among the people.

—*Psalm 105:1*

“True religion is so inseparably connected with happiness, that none can be happy without it in this world or in the next, or fail of happiness if they duly attend to it.”

—*Thomas Scott*.⁷

⁷ Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, According to the Authorized Version, with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, and Crocker and Brewster. New York: J. Leavitt, 1827), Vol. V, p. 42.