

CHRISTINE.

BY KATHERINE PEARSON WOODS.

III

There are two texts in the Bible that always seem to me to explain each other, yet there is no marginal reference about it and I do not know that I have ever seen the connection pointed out. One says that to become as little children is an essential preliminary to entrance into the kingdom of heaven, the other, "The common people heard him gladly." And in truth, with all their very obvious faults and failings, there is something very childlike about the character of the residents of the slums. And there was also something of the eternal fitness of things in calling Roland and Jack Weekes "the boys," although neither of them would see thirty again.

They went out, on the evening when my story began, from the presence of the broom and dust pan—or such substitutes for these as were possessed at No. 47—half wishing that they were women, or at least that it were not beneath a man's dignity to stay and help. There was nowhere that they especially cared to go, except to the beer saloon at the corner, and the fellows there were, as Roland said, "Too contounded noisy." "The fellows," on the other hand, said that them Weekes boys were too lazy even to sing a song or play a game of cards, which statement was not without some foundation in truth.

As they strolled along, therefore, with their hands in their pockets, Roland began to laugh. "What queer critters girls are, Jack," he said; "I don't know but it will be a good thing, though, to take the top crust off the dirt, but to do it for the Lord to see! My eyes!"

"Don't know but I liked that praying chap," said Jack. "Say, his shop is somewhere round here, ain't it?"

"Just up this street. Want to go?"

Jack opined that it might be a change for a fellow, and the two dropped in accordingly. The audience fully justified Captain Royal's description of it, but the brothers, though interested and attentive, did not seem to find anything to suit their particular case, until the sermon was over and the audience dismissed, after some individual work and much enthusiasm. Then Jack, sauntering up to the Captain with an air of good-fellowship, observed that it was a good season for revivals in that neighborhood, they had left home to escape one and had run into another, "For, you know, our folks have just started to run opposition to you, Cap'n, they are revivin' with soap and water."

"But I dunno," put in Roland, languidly, "how a man is to take hold when there's nothing to take hold of. You show me some work now that's well paid and worth doing and I'll show you a man that ain't afraid of it, but what's the use of working yourself black in the face and making nothing by it?"

"Can you whitewash?" asked Captain Praise-the-Lord, suddenly.

"I guess we know how to do most anything," said Jack.

"Then I take you at your word," said Royal Fern. "This room is suffering for a coat of whitewash, as you can see for yourselves. I meant to do it alone tonight, for I work all day and have no other time except when our meetings are over. Take hold and help me and the Lord will reward you."

"How much?" asked Jack.

Captain Praise-the-Lord fixed his eyes full upon the man's. They were not bad faces, those of the Weekes boys, and just now that of Roland expressed chiefly amusement and Jack's good-humored sarcasm. They were ready enough, from sheer lack of employment, to help him with his job; but that he should promise a reward from the Lord amused the boys. As if he held the key of the Lord's treasury! A little more of that pious talk would disgust them.

"Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

You see, the man believed his own words as entirely as Malachi himself. Otherwise it would not have answered to use them. One finds almost everything second-hand in the slums except religious experiences; but these, even when offered, are of no more use than some one else's false teeth. Something real and vital passed from the heart of the evangelist into the hearts of the men before him. "Done!" said Jack, and Roland added, "We'll hold the Lord to his word, too."

"He asks nothing better," said Captain Praise-the-Lord.

But I must repeat that a mere hope or pious opinion that the Lord would reward them in a general way would not have answered with Roland and Jack; they would have felt the unreality of it (as children do) and would have gone their way smiling. Captain Praise-the-Lord was absolutely certain that the Lord would give them something which, though they might not have been able to choose it beforehand, they would admit, when they had once received it, was the thing in all the world they had most desired; and more, that he would give it as a direct consequence of the white-washing.

There was still some of the material left when the work was done, and this, by a sudden impulse, Captain Royal gave to his assistants. "You may wish to carry on the good work at home," he said, "and no doubt your mother would be glad of a coat of this on her kitchen."

Mrs. Weekes, by the time the boys returned, was almost too tired to be glad of anything, but the morning brought all of them fresh energy to follow Christine's suggestion that they should keep their promise to help the housecleaning of their upstairs neighbor. This person, however, received them with smiles and assurances that she had been only in fun. "Why, laws! how could you clean, even if you wanted to?" she said. "There's my daughter, now, ain't been out of that cheer, 'cept when I lifts her into her bed, for nine year. Besides, we ain't got time. Sophy, she sews all day and most all night, crippled as she is, at bastin' them boys' knee pants, and I do the machine stitchin' for her; but between us both we don't make sixty cents a day, and we can't spare the time to clean."

"But," said Christine, in a low, intense voice and that strange, far-away look in her eyes, "it is the Lord's will, and you *must* spare the time. Roland and Jack, carry Sophy and her machine down into mother's kitchen. You go, too, Mrs. Downes; we'll houseclean for you."

"Well, my laws!" said Mrs. Downes, "what has come over you, Christine? We always thought you was half-witted, and here you are bossing the gang!"

Christine only smiled. She had known quite well that the neighbors considered that she was not all there. It had not distressed her at all, partly, perhaps, because she supposed it true. She was not like the rest; she could not understand their quarrels and bad language, their loves and hatred. Their ambitions, such as they were, and their disappointments were alike a mystery to Christine, and in the midst of corruption she had grown up as uncontaminated as a lily from the black ooze of the pond. Now she had found her native air and language in the kingdom of heaven. The things of which the Ferns told were to her the articulate expression of something she had always vaguely felt and known. She had hated the grime and filth around her, but that she and others ought to be clean for the Lord to see she had not known. That it was so filled her with power and energy. She was not to be withstood or gainsaid.

Mrs. Downes only stopped long enough to see the beginning of the work. She had had husbands like the Samaritan woman, and there were several half-brothers and sisters of Sophy's, of various ages, to share her crust when there happened to be one. The last incumbent had borne the name of Downes, and had left it behind him, his sole legacy to the widow by courtesy, when he changed his residence. This had been some six months before, and a certain pot turtle of which he was very fond had not been forthcoming on his departure, but now, as the household brigade began operations, Mrs. Downes suddenly exclaimed, "Well, my laws, if there ain't Downes's turtle, been under the bed all this time!" And, to be sure, there it was!

Perhaps this anecdote, which I assure the reader is a fact, may be taken instead of fuller details of the work of the brigade, a name given them at first in derision, but soon coming to denote a very important factor in the life of the Wyvern Tenements; for the enthusiasm spread, no one knew just how, except that enthusiasm is the very one thing needful in the slums. Lacking it the people there are avid of any sort of excitement—a fight or a funeral, a wedding or a murder, will draw them in crowds. They want something, rather they want everything, but two things chiefly—work and the energy to do it. Failing these, they resort to drink, which supplies for a time both the occupation and the exhilaration that comes from duty performed. Christine had found the work, and her singing soon supplied the enthusiasm—her singing aided by that of the Ferns, for it may be imagined that Captain Praise-the-Lord did not neglect this new pouring out of the Spirit. He was always on hand to spur on the falling with a word of prayer or a new hymn, which they might stop their own singing for while he sang for them; for the peculiarity of the brigade was that it began work in the evening and only paused about midnight. It had been born, as we know, at that time and so continued, partly from force of habit, after dark being the hour when the slums are most alive, and partly because it could then command more recruits. People who worked at all were then more apt to be at home.

Roland and Jack found themselves at the head of the whitewashing division, a superabundance of whitewash being found by Captain Royal, who at that time received a gift of money from sympathizing friends to

be used according to his best judgment. And in the midst of it all rent day came, and the agent opened his office and sat, like Matthew, at the receipt of custom. Now according to all single tax precepts and economic theories in general, the agent would have been all the more rabid for his rent, and the rent itself would have risen immediately. But neither single tax nor political economy make any provision for the Spirit of the Lord, and so if this particular agent was seized in the stream of enthusiasm and borne along with it, it must be understood as a phenomenal occurrence and by no means as disproving the rule that "the landlord gets it all."

"The earth is the Lord's," and he disposes of the economic rent as he will.

The agent wrote to the heir of the railroad king who had built the tenements about the tidal wave revival that was sweeping over them, and advised a certain judicious outlay of capital as likely to further the same, and an answer came to paint the hundred and fifty dwellings, inside and out, to improve the plumbing—as to which the press was beginning to howl, the tidal wave having drawn attention to that quarter of the city—and to make any other necessary repairs. Now Roland and Jack were painters by trade, and the work they had already done pointed them out to the agent as the proper persons to take charge of the job. And as the boys had plenty of brains and had only lacked energy, they managed very well and showed an aptitude and administrative capacity of which no one would have believed them capable. But the grace of God can develop even "faculty."

Then the owner came on to see the conclusion of the matter, and was so much pleased—being somewhat of a philanthropist—and so anxious that the revolution should not go backwards that he appointed Patty Weekes, who had been recommended to him by Miss Guest of the Charity Organization Society, lady rent collector for one side of the street—with the willing co-operation of the agent—and with the understanding that she was to exercise the oversight only possible to a woman over the cleanliness of the whole property. The boys, by this time, had developed into a firm of building contractors in a small way, and in a year or so were able to put up a tidy little home for their mother, where she might hope to end her days in comparative luxury.

So much for the external reward which had been promised to them; for the rest—though none of the Weekeses but would have objected to that order—there are some who wonder how the Weekeses have changed so little and others who insist that they have altered beyond recognition. The neighborhood has changed, that is very sure; yet it is not because every inmate of the tenements has become a worthy member of society, far less of the kingdom of heaven; but this transformation has come to so many that the rest have ceased to feel at home and have moved on. Even the Ferns have carried their labors further, into what are still the slums; but they keep their house in the tenements as a home and also carry on services in the pretty chapel Roland and Jack have put up for them. Christine is an efficient helper, with her strangely shining eyes and her beautiful singing, and even Miss Guest is willing that she should so devote her time, as "the poor

girl is fit for nothing else"; for Miss Guest still thinks of Christine as "the half-witted sister," and if it be half-witted to take no pleasure in anything that touches earth with one hand, unless it also touch heaven with the other, to feel no impulse from any motive but the love of God, then I fear Miss Guest is right.

Dora does not giggle any longer, but laughs instead, with a childish abandon that makes her the joy of her little home and the delight of her husband and children. And Roland and Jack, the old lazy habits having been broken up once for all by the enthusiasm of the housecleaning brigade, and their faith strengthened into grateful love by the literal fulfillment of Captain Praise-the-Lord's promise, Roland and Jack are the same sober men and good sons that they have always been, but with their faults corrected and their defects supplied by "the joy of the Lord." Mrs. Weekes often says that she doesn't know why she should be blessed in her old age with such good children, for even Patty is a comfort to her now. She's sure she ain't done nothin' to deserve 'em, which no doubt is true; and when she adds that it must be just the loving kindness of the Lord, that is truer still.

For, after all, the transformation wrought upon the Weekeses is nothing like so difficult as that which is needed by some of us. We need to repent and become as little children; they had only to enter the kingdom of heaven.