THE LIE.*

One day, about three weeks after the announcement of the strike in Mr. Watson's shops, Jeanie Casey came to Agnes, and said:

"I have been grieving to tell you, and the sinful pride would not let me speak. But now I will. But you mustn't be thinking how that I wouldn't do the same to morrow if it was to do—for I would. There is no repentance in me. But I must be telling somebody. I must."

Agnes put her into an easy chair and took away her hat and jacket and kissed her. Jeanie had grown thin; the large simplicity of her gaze was gone; she looked at Agnes straight and square, but with sternness, and there was a curious rigidity about her mouth.

"She is like the pictures of the old covenanters," thought Agnes, "and perhaps I am to blame." Aloud, she

*The Burden of Christopher. By Florence Converse. Copyright, 1900, by Houghton, Mifflin & Co. Price, $1.50.

said: "I've tried to see you, Jeanie, ever since the strike began, but you were always in town, or away somewhere getting money; and this week we thought Christopher was going to have the measles, but he didn't."

"I left little Jean with him in the garden," said Jeanie; and then she folded her hands and sat still in the great chair, and lost herself in her thoughts.

"Tell me how you ever persuaded them to organize," said Agnes, after a few seconds of silence. "It seemed such an impossible task."

"For a long time I'd no hope," Jeanie replied. "They were but staring loons in the beginning; but there were some with husbands, and these got into the way of talking with them, and of a sudden, whether I would have it or no, the thing spread; and after a bit it rolled up like a snowball, verra fast —too fast. And out of my hand it was; and I, there, feeling it to slip and could not stop it. Here in Kenyon a woman will have a bit time of her own for the thinking—but there!—And if there's no thinking there'll be no doing;—or there-'ll be just blind, crazy doing.."

"How do you mean?" said Agnes, uneasily; "don't you approve of this strike?"

"Ay!—of this strike; but that's a verra different matter."

"I don't understand."

"There was a cut-down; and the stitchers were fierce to go out for a rise. The terrible thing it is, Mrs. Kenyon, to feel the people slip out from the power of you, and take their own way. To hold your hand out in a torrent and think to hold the water back, and feel it over-slip the grasp of you, and never stop for you, nor take notice of you that your hand is there. That is it! But the Lord had an eye to His poor. He turned the torrent another way. And to me He showed a mercy that I am not deserving; for it is a verra sinful woman that I am—verra sinful."

She fell into a reverie again, and said nothing for a long while. At last Agnes touched her hand.

"You said you were going to tell me, Jeanie."

"Yes!—I must be telling somebody."

The voices of the children came up from the garden. There was shouting, and then:—

"Stop, Chrissie!—you hurt! Stop!"

Agnes went to the window and threw it open. Her son was hauling an unwilling little maiden across the untrodden snow.

"Chris!—Chris!—What are you doing? Don't be rude! Remember she is a little girl."

"We're playing strike, mother, and she's a scab, and I'm just giving it to her. Come away, you mean, old traitor you, I'll teach you to take the bread out of my children's mouths!"

"Don't you think you would better play something that isn't quite so rough?" suggested Agnes.

"I don't want to be a 'cab all the time," protested little Jeanie; "it's your turn now."

"I'm not going to be a scab ever, even playing," Christopher cried; and Agnes closed the window and left them to settle the matter as best they could.

Jeanie did not seem to have heard the controversy, but when their hostess came and sat down beside her, she gathered her thoughts together with an evident effort, and began:—

"It's neither here nor there with this strike, what I'm telling you now; it can mak' no difference one way or another to that. It's just for my own self, and that I'm sore wanting a friend."

Agnes felt a sense of relief, for which she reproached herself. She had been dreading some revelation which should prejudice the public against the strikers.

"Tell me, dear!" she whispered, stroking Jeanie's hand.

"There was a day, some while back,—and the forewoman that had left the shop cam' in again to work. The week before that there was the cut-down. The woman was a meddling body, but she meant it for her duty. She was a cruel woman, but God-fearing. Far be it fra' such a weak vessel as I to detract fra' her. They lie in that shop, Mrs. Kenyon, and they tak' what does not belong to them, and they're aye at strife one with another. A heart-breaking place it is. The forewoman took notice of me that day for my good, quick work, and so she saw the other women, how they cam' talking to me, for they were angry with the cut-down—and she did but rub them on the raw places, so they were mad against her, and crazy for the strike. There was not a woman cam' by my chair but did not stop to complain, railing against Annie Curry, the forewoman, and demanding the strike. Then Annie Curry cam' beside me and said, 'Where is it that I've seen you?' and I said, 'I don't know;'—it was true—I didn't know. Then she said to me, 'Have you ever worked in the Kenyon shops?' and I said, 'No, I never have.'"

"Jeanie!"

The Scotchwoman lifted her head and looked sternly for a while at her friend.

"For four months I had worked among these women, Mrs. Kenyon, early and late, to lead them out of the land of Egypt, to learn them the only way to stand out for their bit bread,—when the master cuts and cuts and cuts into the wages. And they were beginning to understand. If I'd left them then,—all that I'd been at would have gone for naught. They'd have rioted a bit, and been brought low, and crowded under to worse blackness and worse hunger. They weren't fit to stand alone,—and do you think I'd leave them then, just to the saving of my one soul? I'm thinking any way the Lord wouldn't have great need of a soul that could desert his poor, downtrodden ones in their straits. I'm thinking the Lord will not be hard on me for that lie, Mrs. Kenyon."

Agnes realized what a pale, untried morality was hers, in her sheltered life. To remonstrate with this burdened sister semed impertinence.

"But if the people who are trying to help this strike should find that the strikers were—did—that sometimes they said what wasn't quite straight," she faltered, "I am afraid they might lose sympathy."

"And how many times, tell me, Mrs. Kenyon, has that old man lied to his workers, or made his superintendent lie to them, or made Annie Curry lie to them? Ah, if the people beïnt brought up on lies by the ones that pretend to be standing for a model to them, do you think they wouldn't be ashamed to lie? But it's give a lie and tak' a lie, till the truth's overlaid so deep, there's no man can come at it even with a pickaxe."

"I know, it is our fault," said Agnes, sadly.

"But don't go to fash yourself about this lie, now, Mrs. Kenyon. It has not a thing to do with the strike. The Lord turned the torrent. These women with their overweaning recklessness made Annie Curry suspicious of trade union talk; and you'll be knowing as how that Mr. Watson boasts him that he always had a free shop. And he put up the notices,—and we all cam' out. The women are doing bravely. They'll stick to it better than the men, now they have come to it."

"You think, then, that a lie is justifiable, sometimes?" questioned Agnes. She was troubled.

"I don't know that. But this I know, that the Lord will be waiting to the Judgment Day to say to me, 'Jeanie,'

will He say, 'Jeanie, I thank you verra kindly for that lie.'"

Agnes gasped.

Her friend's eyes blazed.

"If that woman had cam' to you," she cried, "and asked of you in my place the question,—and all those poor things with but you to look to, and only half way to knowing how to get out from their slavery, would you have said yes, and let them turn you out? Could you?"

"No," said Agnes, slowly. "No,—I—oh, I know I should have told the lie. But it's wrong. We don't know the ways of God, Jeanie; they are not our ways. He could bring success, you know, even if we could not see how it was to come."

"But if it's a mistake I've made, oh, Mrs. Kenyon! The Lord could have showed me another way, if it had been His will so to do. And if it was all to be done over again, I'd be saying the same words. There's no helping it."

"I know—I understand," Agnes whispered soothingly.

"I couldn't tell Jimmie, Mrs. Kenyon. And the nights I lie awake with thinking on it, till my thoughts go a-ring-around dizzy. And it's sickened I am to the sight of food. I had to come to speak with you, to share it. But don't be troubled for the strike—this strike—there is nothing the lie would have to do with that."

"I hope not," Agnes said. But she thought of her father, with his passion for accuracy, for moral purity, his instinctive distrust of the workingman, and her heart sank.