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**ROBERT HARDY'S SEVEN DAYS.**

A DREAM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

BY REV. CHARLES M. SHELDON,  
Author of "In His Steps," "The Crucifixion of Philip Strong," "Malcom Kirk," Etc.

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Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
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[CONTINUED.]

The superintendent passed along shaking his head sorrowfully, and Mr. Hardy, who seemed guided by some power he could not resist and compelled to listen whether he liked it or not, next found himself looking into one of the railroad shop tenements, where the man Scoville was lying, awaiting amputation of both feet after the terrible accident. Scoville's wife lay upon a ragged lounge, while Mrs. Hardy's cook knelt by her side and in her native Swedish tongue tried to comfort the poor woman. So it was true that these two were sisters. The man was still conscious and suffering unexpressibly. The railroad surgeon had been sent for, but had not arrived. Three or four men and their wives had come in to do what they could. Mr. Burns, the foreman, was among them. One of the men spoke in a whisper to him:

"Have you been to see Mr. Hardy?"

"Yes, but he was at church. I left word about the accident."

"At church! So even the devil sometimes goes to church. What for, I wonder? Will he be here, think?"

"Don't know," replied Mr. Burns curtly.

"Do you mind when he"—pointing to Scoville—"saved Mr. Hardy's life?"

"Remember it well enough; was standing close by."

"What'll be done with the children when Scoville goes, eh?"

"Don't know."

Just then the surgeon came in, and preparations were rapidly made for the operation. The last that Mr. Hardy heard was the shriek of the poor wife as she struggled to her feet and fell in a fit across the floor where two of the youngest children clung terrified to her dress, and the father cried out, tears of agony and despair running down his face, "My God, what a hell this world is!"

The next scene was a room where everything appeared confused at first, but finally grew more distinct and terrible in its significance, and the first person Mr. Hardy recognized was his oldest boy, George, in company with a group of young men engaged in—what! He rubbed his eyes and stared painfully. Yes; they were gambling. So here was where George spent all his money and Bessie's too! Nothing that the miserable father had seen so far cut him to the quick quite so sharply as this. He had prided himself on his own freedom from vices and had an honest horror of them, for Mr. Hardy was not a monster of iniquity, only an intensely selfish man. Gambling, drinking, impurity—all the physical vices—were to Mr. Hardy the lowest degradation.

The thought that his own son had fallen into this pit was terrible to him. But he was compelled to look and listen. All the young men were smoking, and beer and wine stood on a buffet at one side of the room and were plentifully partaken of.

"I say, George," said a very flashily dressed youth who was smoking that invention of the devil, a cigarette, "your old man would rub his eyes to see you here, eh?"

"Well, I should remark he would," replied George as he shuffled the cards and then helped himself to a drink.

"I say, George," said the first speaker, "your sister Bess is getting to be a beauty. Introduce me, will you?"

"No, I won't," said George shortly. He had been losing all the evening, and he felt nervous and irritable.

"Ah! We are too bad, eh?"

George made some fierce reply, and the other fellow struck him. Instantly George sprang to his feet, and a fight took place. Mr. Hardy could not bear it any longer. He thought he broke away from the scene by the exercise of a great determination and next found himself looking into his own home. It seemed to him it was an evening when he and all the children had gone out, and Mrs. Hardy sat alone, looking into the fire as she had been looking before he fell asleep. She was thinking, and her thoughts were like burning coals as they fell into Mr. Hardy's heart and scorched him as not any scene, not even the last, had done.

"My husband!" Mrs. Hardy was saying to herself. "How long it is since he gave me a caress, kissed me when he went to his work or laid his hand lovingly on my cheek as he used to do! How brave and handsome and good I used to think him in the old Vermont days when we were struggling for our little home and his best thought was of the home and of the wife! But the years have changed him! Oh, yes; they have changed him bitterly! I wonder if he realizes my hunger for his affection! Of what value to me are all these baubles wealth brings compared with a loving look, a tender smile, an affectionate caress?"

"Oh, Robert, Robert! Come back to me, for I am so lonely, so lonely!

wife toward him and caressed her, while Bess crept up and put her arms about her father's neck.

The terrible suspicion shot into Mrs. Hardy's mind that her husband was insane. The children were terrified. Only Alice seemed to catch the reflection of her mother's thought. At the same time Mr. Hardy seemed to feel the suspicion held by them.

"No," he said as if in answer to a spoken charge, "I am not insane. I never was more calm. I am in possession of all my faculties. But I have looked into the Face of Eternity this night, and I know, I know, that in seven days God will require my soul. Mary," he turned to his wife with the most beseeching cry, "Mary, do you believe me?"

She looked into her husband's face and saw there the old look. Reason, the noblest of all gifts, shone out of that noble face, now lighted up with the old love and standing on the brink of the other world. And Mrs. Hardy, looking her husband in the face, replied:

"Yes, Robert; I believe you. You may be mistaken in this impression about the time left you to live, but you are not insane."

"O God, I thank thee for that!" cried Mr. Hardy.

Often during the most remarkable week he ever lived Mr. Hardy reposed in that implicit belief of his wife in his sanity.

There was a pause. Then Mr. Hardy asked George to bring the Bible. He then read from John's gospel that matchless prayer of Christ in the seventeenth chapter, and then kneeling down he prayed as he had never prayed before that in the week allotted him to live he might know how to bless the world and serve his Master best. And when he arose and looked about upon his wife and children it was with the look of one who has been into the very presence chamber of the only living God. At the same moment, so fast had the time gone in the excitement, the clock upon the mantel struck the hour of midnight, and the first of Robert Hardy's seven days had begun.

**CHAPTER III.**

When Mr. Hardy woke on the morning of the first of the seven days left him to live, he was on the point of getting ready for his day's business, as usual, when the memory of his dream flashed upon him, and he was appalled to decide what he should do first. Breakfast was generally a hurried and silent meal with him. The children usually came straggling down at irregular intervals, and it was very rare that the family all sat down together. This morning Mr. Hardy waited until all had appeared, and while they were eating he held a family council.

His wife was evidently in great excitement and anxiety, and yet the love and tenderness she felt coming back to her from her husband gave her face a look of beauty that had been a stranger to it for years.

The children were affected by their father's remarkable change in various ways. George was sullen and silent. Will looked thoughtful and troubled. Alice, a girl of very strong and decided opinions and character, greeted her father with a kiss and seemed to understand the new relations he now sustained to them all. Clara appeared terrified, as if death had already come into the house, and several times she broke down, crying at the table, and finally went away into the sitting room. Bess sat next to her father, as she always did, and was the most cheerful of all, taking a very calm and philosophical view of the situation, so that Mr. Hardy smiled once or twice as she gave her advice.

Mr. Hardy was pale, but calm. The



There was his own wife bending over him.

impression of the night before was evidently deepening with him. It would have been absurd to call him insane. His wife was obliged to confess to herself that he had never appeared more sound in judgment and calm in speech. He was naturally a man of very strong will. His passions, as we have already seen, were under control. Never in all his life had he felt so self-contained, so free from nervousness, so capable of sustained effort. But the one great thought that filled his mind was the thought of the shortness of the time.

"Almighty God," was his prayer, "show me how to use these seven days in the wisest and best manner."

"Robert, what will you do today?" asked Mrs. Hardy.

"I have been thinking, dear, and I believe my first duty is to God. We have not had morning worship together for a long time. After we have knelt as a family in prayer to him I believe he will give me wisdom to know what I ought to do."

"I think father ought to stay at home with us all the time," said Bess.

"Robert," said Mrs. Hardy, who could not comprehend the full meaning of the situation much better than little Bess, "will you give up your business? How can you attend to it? Will you have the strength and the patience while laboring under this impression?"

"I have already thought over that. Yes; I believe I ought to go right on. I don't see what would be gained by severing my connection with the company."

"Will you tell the company you have only"—Mrs. Hardy could not say the words. They choked her.

"What would you do, Alice?" asked her father, turning to his oldest daughter, who, although a cripple, had more than once revealed to the family great powers of judgment and decision.

"I would not say anything to the company about it," replied Alice finally.

"That is the way I feel," said Mr. Hardy with a nod of approval. "They would not understand it. My successor in the office will be young Wellman, in all probability, and he is perfectly competent to carry on the work. I feel as if the matter were one that belonged to the family. I shall, of course, arrange my business affairs with reference to the situation, and George can give me half a day for the details. But you know, Mary, I have always kept my business in such shape that in any case of accident or sudden death matters could easily be arranged. Thank God! I shall not have to take time for those matters that I ought to give to more serious and important duties."

It was true that Mr. Hardy, always a man of very methodical habits in a business way, had always arranged his affairs with reference to accidental removal. His business as manager necessitated his being on the road a great deal, and he realized, as many railroad men do realize, the liability of sudden death.

But such a thought had not had any influence on his actions to make him less selfish. He thought, as all men do, that he should probably live right along after all; that death might take the engineer or conductor or fireman, but would pass him by.

Suddenly Will spoke up: "Father, do you want George and me to leave college?"

"Certainly not, my boy. What would be gained by that? I want you to keep right on just as if I were going to live 50 years more."

George did not say anything. He looked at his father as if he doubted his sanity.

His father noticed the look, and a terrible wave of anguish swept over him as he recalled the part of his vision in which he had seen his oldest son in the gambling room.

Again the prayer he had been silently praying all the morning went up out of his heart, "Almighty God, show me how to use the seven days most wisely."

"Father," said Bess suddenly, "what will you do about Jim and Clara? Did you know they were engaged?"

"Bess!" said Clara passionately. Then she stopped suddenly, and, seeing her father's brow grow dark, she covered, afraid of what was coming.

But Mr. Hardy looked at the world differently this morning. Twenty-four hours before he would have treated Bessie's remark as he usually treated her surprising revelations of the secrets of the family. He would have laughed at it a little and sternly commanded Clara to break the engagement if there was one at once, for James Caxton was not at all the sort of man Mr. Hardy wanted to have come into the family. He was poor, to begin with, and, more than all, his father had been the means of defeating Mr. Hardy in a municipal election where a place of influence and honor was in dispute. Mr. Hardy had never forgotten or forgiven it. When he began to see his children intimate with the Caxtons, he tried to forbid their going to the house, with the result already described.

Mr. Hardy looked at Clara and said very tenderly: "Clara, we must have a good talk about this. You know your father loves you and wants you to be happy, and"—Mr. Hardy stopped in his emotion, and Clara burst into tears and left the table.

"Come," cried Mr. Hardy after a moment, during which no one seemed inclined to speak, "let us ask God to give us all wisdom at this time."

George made a motion as if to go out. "My son," called Mr. Hardy after him gently, "won't you stay with the rest of us?"

George sat down with a shamefaced look. Alice and Clara came back, and Mr. Hardy read that famous sixth chapter of Ephesians, beginning "Children, obey your parents in the Lord." Then in a brief but earnest prayer he asked God's help and blessing on all the day and rose to face it, the great burden of his responsibility beginning to rest upon him for the first time. He sat down for a moment by his wife and kissed her, putting his arms about her, while Bess climbed up on the side of the couch, and the boys stood irresolute and wondering. Any outward mark of affection was so unusual on the part of their father that they felt awkward in the presence of it. Mrs. Hardy was almost overcome.

"Oh, Robert, I cannot bear it! Surely it was nothing more than a dream. It couldn't have been anything more. You are not going to be called away from us so soon."

"Mary, I would to God that I had seven years to atone for my neglect and selfishness toward you alone. But I am certain that God has granted me but seven days. I must act, God help me! Boys, you will be late. We will all be at home this evening. Alice, care for your mother and cheer her up. You are a good girl and"—

Again Mr. Hardy broke down as he thought of the many years he had practically ignored this brave, strong, uncomplaining nature in his own house, and remorse tore him fiercely as he recalled how he had practically discouraged all the poor girl's ambitious efforts to make her way as an artist, not on account of the expense,