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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," "Malcolm Kirk," Etc.

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Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

CHAPTER XII.

Allie, with the quickness of thought that always characterized her, planned that all the rest should go to church while she remained with Clara. Will was able to go out now. So, for the first time in months, Robert and his wife and Bess and the two boys sat together in the same seat. George had not been to church for a year, and Will was very irregular in his attendance.

The opening services seemed especially impressive and beautiful to Mr. Hardy. He wondered how he had ever dared sit and criticize Mr. Jones and the way he had of reading the hymns. To be sure, he was not a perfect speaker, but his love for his people and his great love for men and his rare good life every day were so well known that they ought to have counted for more than they ever did.

It is astonishing how many good deeds and good men pass through this world unnoticed and unappreciated, but every evil deed is caught up and magnified and criticized by press and people until it seems as if the world must be a very wicked place indeed and the good people very scarce indeed.

Mr. Hardy joined in the service with a joy unknown to him for years. He had come to it from the reading of his Bible instead of the reading of the morning paper and from prayer instead of from thoughts of his business or a yawning stroll through his library. His mind was receptive of the best things in the service. He entered into it with the solemn feeling that it was his last.

And when the minister gave out the text, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every man may receive the things done in his body, whether they be good or bad," he started and leaned forward intently, feeling that the message of the preacher was for him and him alone and strangely appropriate for his own peculiar condition. The first statement of the sermon arrested his attention and held him to the argument irresistibly to the end:

"The judgment seat of Christ will not be a dreadful place to a man whose sins have been forgiven in this world, but if he comes up to it seamed and scarred and stained with sins unrepented of and unforgiven because he has not asked God to forgive him it will be a place of awful fear to his soul. There are men here in this audience who are as ready to die now as they ever will be. They have made their peace with God. They have no quarrel with their neighbors. Their accounts are all square in business. They are living in loving relations with the home circle. They have no great burdens of remorse or regret weighing them down, and if God should call them this minute to step up to the judgment seat they would be ready.

"But there are other men here who are not at all ready for such a tremendous event. They may think they are, but they are mistaken. How can they stand before the greatest being in all the universe and have no fear when they are unprepared to answer his questions: 'Why did you not confess me before men? Why did you not do as I commanded and bear the burdens of the work instead of pleasing yourself?' What will the man say then?

"It is true that Christ is all merciful, all loving. But will it make no difference with a soul whether it comes up to his judgment seat out of a life of selfish ease and indulgence or out of a life of self sacrifice and restraint? When every possible offer of mercy is held out to men on earth and they will not accept it, will it be all the same as if they had when they came before the judgment seat of Christ? Why, that would be to mock at the meaning of the incarnation and the atonement. It would be to cast scorn and contempt on the agony in the garden and the crucifixion. It would make unnecessary all the prayer and preaching. What possible need is there that men preach a gospel of salvation unless there is danger of the opposite?

"If we are all going to be saved any way, no matter whether we accept God's love in Christ or not, what use is the church? And why should we be anxious any more about our children? And what difference does it make whether they go to the bad here in this world or in the world to come they will all be saved? For eternity will be so much grander and sweeter and enduring than time that we might as well take it easy here and not pay much attention to the message, 'God so loved the world—that is, if we are going to be saved any way.

"Why should we care very much if it does say in the revelation of God's word that the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment if we don't believe it? Why, the wicked will stand just as good a chance of eternal glory as the good if the judgment seat

of Christ does not mean a separation of the good from the bad. Let us close our churches and go home. Let us eat and drink and dance and be merry, for tomorrow we may die; and after death the judgment, and after the judgment glory and joy and power and peace and life eternal in the presence of God.

"It is true we scorned him on earth, but that won't make any difference; he will receive us just the same. It is true we refused to believe in his only begotten Son after all he suffered of shame and agony for us, but that makes no difference; he will say, 'Enter into the joy of thy Lord.' It is true we made fun of Christians and mocked at prayer and sneered at faith, but that is not much to be afraid of. It is true we hated our neighbor and would not forgive an insult, but that is a little thing. It is true when the Holy Spirit pleaded with us a year or six months ago to confess Christ in public we told him to leave us; we were ashamed to do it in the presence of men, to confess him who spread out his arms on a cross of bitterness agony for us, but for all that we feel sure that when we march up to the judgment seat of Christ he will treat us just the same as he treats the disciples who have laid down their lives for the Master.

"Then let us tear out of the Bible every line that speaks of retribution or punishment or judgment—for we don't like those passages; they hurt our feelings—and let us leave only those words that speak of love and mercy and forgiveness, for those words are the only ones that can be true, for those words don't make us feel uncomfortable.

"Away with everything that hurts our feelings, that makes us anxious, that sends us to our knees in prayer, that makes us confess Christ and live a life of self denial and service, for when the judgment seat is prepared and Christ sits down there and we appear before him he will receive us as we come before him—the pure and the impure, the selfish and the proud and the humble and the believer and the disbeliever and infidels and scoffers and cowards and despisers of God's love on the earth, all the class of men who fell back on weak and imperfect Christians as an excuse for their own weak lives, and the drunkards and the liars and the oppressors of the poor, and everybody who heard a thousand sermons full of gospel and despised them because of some imperfection in the delivery or elocution, and all those men who went through the earth betrayers of the home, and the selfish politicians who betrayed their country, and all the men who read the Bible and believe only the parts that didn't hurt their sensitive feelings, and the young men who lived fast lives and sowed wild oats because a wicked and false public sentiment made them think it was excusable and perhaps necessary, and all the other men and women who lived as they pleased, regardless of God and eternity. When all these shall appear before the judgment seat of Christ, he will behold them all as one soul and with a smile of gracious pardon will reach out his almighty arm and sweep them all alike into a heaven of eternal bliss, there to reign with him in glory and power, world without end!

"But is this what Christ taught the world? Suppose what we have said is true. It turns his whole life into a splendid mockery. Foolishness and absurdity could go no further than to create a life like his and to put into his mouth such teachings as we have received if at the judgment seat all souls, regardless of their acts in this world, are received on an equal footing and all received into eternal life. And where is there any room in the teachings of Christ for a purgatory? Do we believe that? Is it not the plain teaching that after the judgment the destiny of souls is fixed forever?

"But what could man wish more? Will he not have opportunity enough to accept the mercy of God before that time? Does he not have opportunity? If any soul appears at last and at the judgment complains that he did not have a fair chance, will that gracious Judge condemn him if his complaint be true? We know he will not. But the facts of the judgment are these: At that time, whenever it is, the souls of men will be passed for their acts in the earthly life, a verdict that will determine their everlasting destiny, and that verdict will be just and it will be merciful. For the crucified one could not do otherwise. But the men who have despised and neglected and disbelieved and confessed shall be separated from him forever, and the men who have confessed and believed and tried to live like him shall be in his presence continually.

"There will be a division of souls. It will not be based on wealth or position or birth or education or genius, but on Christlikeness—on that divine and eternal thing we call character. Everything else shall go away into destruc-

tion, into death, into punishment, into banishment from God. And banishment from God will be hell, and it will be a hell not made by God, but by man himself, who had an opportunity—nay, a thousand opportunities—every day of his life to accept the bliss of heaven and of his own selfish choice rejected every one of them and went to his own place.

"But some soul starts up and says: 'You are not preaching the gospel; you are preaching fear, hell, torments. Is this your boasted love of God?' Yes; for what am I preaching if not the love of God when I say, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life?' Is there no danger of perishing? Why did Christ come then? Why did he say the things he did? Why did he speak of the condemnation of the wicked and unbelieving if that were not a part of the gospel?

"The gospel is glad tidings, but what makes it glad tidings? Because of the danger we are in. What is salvation? It is the opposite of being lost. We cannot have one without the other. So I am preaching the gospel here today when I say, 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ!' There will be no fear to us then if we believe in him, if we have lived his life here, if the things done in the body are good. And more than that, as long as this earth life continues God's mercy is with us every moment.

"It is possible some soul is here who for years has lived selfishly within his own little toys of pleasure. He looks back on a life of uselessness, of neglect of all that Christ did for him. He hears the voice of God. He listens, he repents, he cries out, smiting on his breast, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner!' Then what will God do? Will he reject him because he is old in sin, because he has wasted beautiful years? When he appears before the judgment seat, will Christ say: 'You repented too late on earth. You cannot be saved now?'

"No! Even if after 100 years of shame and sin a soul with its outgoing breath in genuine repentance and faith in the Son of God cries out for mercy that cry would be answered, and he would be saved. What less of glory and power such a soul may experience in the



"Did you not hear some one calling?"

realms of glory we may not be able to tell. But he himself will be saved.

"Is not God merciful, then? Let no man depart from this house of God fearful or despairing. The earthly life is full from beginning to close with the love of an Almighty Father. Shun men complain because they cannot have all of this life and all of the other, too, in which to repent and be forgiven? Now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation. Today if ye will hear his voice harden not your hearts.

"Men of Barton, you have heard the word of God proclaimed from this desk today. Young men, will you wait until you are old in sin and shame before you will repent and be saved? How do you know you will live to be old men? And what a life to live, even if you were sure of a hundred years, to pour out the dregs at last as an offering to Christ just to escape hell! Oh, all men, hear ye this day the message of Christ! He is a Saviour of sinners. It is not necessary that any man go away from this service unsaved. You may believe here and now. Won't you do it? 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' Then go home and pray, rejoicing.

"And if the Almighty call you out and away from this prison of clay into his resplendent presence this very night what will you have to fear? Not one thing. You have put your trust in him. Your sins are all forgiven. You can appear before his judgment seat and await your verdict with a calm and joyful soul, for you know as you gaze into the loving countenance of your Redeemer and Judge that when he turns and speaks to you he will say, 'Come, ye beloved of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Truly God is love!"

The prayer that followed the sermon seemed to bring all the souls in the church very close to God. The events of the past week had stirred the town deeply. The awful disaster so near them, the speech of Mr. Hardy in the town hall, rumors of the experience he was having—all these had prepared the audience for just such a sermon on Sunday morning. And men bowed their heads and prayed in that house who had not done such a thing sincerely in many years.

Robert had many inquiries concerning himself and Clara to answer at the close of the service. He finally went up and thanked the minister for what he had said and spoke as he never had spoken before in encouragement of his pastor's work. But it seemed to him that he must be getting home. The time was growing short. He must have the rest of it with the dear ones in the home.

What need to describe the details of the afternoon? Robert Hardy had the joy of knowing that all his children were with him, and at dark James came over and asked if he might join the circle. He did not know all that Mr. Hardy had gone through, but the children had told him enough to make him want to be with the family.

"Why, come right in and join the circle, Jim. You're one of us," cried Mr. Hardy cheerfully. So Jim drew up his chair, and the conversation went on.

They were sitting in the up stairs room where Clara lay and facing an open fire. The doctor had called in the middle of the afternoon and brought two other skilled surgeons and physicians at Mr. Hardy's request. It was a singular case, and nothing special could be done. This was the unanimous opinion after deep consultation, and after remaining some time the doctors had withdrawn.

When it grew dark, Alice started to turn on the lights, but her father said, "Let us sit in the firelight." So they drew close together and in awe looked upon him who seemed so sure that God would call him away at midnight. Who shall recount the words that were uttered, the exact sentences spoken, the fears and hopes and petitions and tears of the wife, the commands of the father to his boys to grow up into the perfect manhood in Jesus Christ, the sweet words of love and courage that passed between him and his wife and daughters? These things cannot be described; they can only be imagined.

So the night passed. It was after 11 o'clock, when the conversation had almost ceased and all were sitting hushed in a growing silence, that Clara spoke again, so suddenly and clearly that they were all startled and awed by it:

"Father! Mother! Where have I been? I have had such a dream! Where are you? Where am I?"

Mrs. Hardy arose and, with tears streaming down her face, knelt beside the bed and in a few words recalled Clara to her surroundings. The girl had come out of her strange unconsciousness with all her faculties intact. Gradually she recalled the past, the accident, the dream of her father. She smiled happily on them all, and they for awhile forgot the approach of midnight and its possible meaning to Mr. Hardy—all but himself. He knelt by the bed, at the side of his wife, and thanked God that his dear one was restored.

Suddenly he rose to his feet and spoke aloud, quietly, but clearly:

"Did you not hear some one calling?"

His face was pale, but peaceful. He bent down and kissed Clara, embraced his sons, drew his wife to him and placed his hand on Bessie's head; then, as if in answer to a command, he gently knelt down again by his chair, and as his lips moved in prayer the clock struck once more the hour of 12. He continued kneeling there, and he was nearer God than he had ever been in all his life before.

Thus Robert Hardy's seven days came to an end.

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