

With Dyed Garments

By R. H. Benson

When the second post came in one morning I saw a letter addressed to the priest, in the trembling large characters of an old man's hand, lying upon the slab in the hall. When I came in to lunch I found the old clergyman with an open letter in his hand, and his face full of almost childish happiness.

"I have heard from my oldest friend," he said, making a little movement with the letter. "It is months since he has written. I have known him ever since we were boys."

We sat down to lunch, but he kept on referring to his friend, and to the pleasure the letter gave him.

"We are always planning to meet," he said to me presently. "But we never can manage it. We are both so old. He is much more active than I am, however. He is full of good works, while I, as you know, lead an idle life. I could not take charge of a church. It is all I can do now to serve my own little chapel upstairs."

"Where is he working?" I asked.

"I think perhaps you fancy he is in Holy Orders, but he is not. He has been on the Stock Exchange till a few years ago, and now he is living in the country, getting ready to die, as he tells me. But he is full of good works; his letter here has news about the village, and of a man whose acquaintance he has made in the reading-room there, which he himself built a year ago; but he is full of plans, too, and asks my advice."

"It is not often you come across a business man like that," I said.

"No, he is wonderful, but he has been like that for years. He has done a great deal all his life among poor people in London. For years he never missed his two or three nights a week in some club, or on some committee, or visiting sick people."

I began to think that it might have been through the friendship of the priest that this man had been such a worker. But presently he began again:

"Perhaps the most wonderful thing was the way he first began to do such work. Let me see, have I mentioned his name? No? Then I can tell you, otherwise it would not be discreet; that is—" he added "if you would care to hear."

I told him I should be very much interested.

"Then after lunch we will have coffee in the garden, and I will tell you."

When we had sat down under the shade of a wall, with the tall avenue of pines opposite us making a dark tangled frieze against the delicate sky, he began.

"What I am going to tell you now has been gathered partly from conversations with my friend: and partly from letters he has written to me. Years ago I jotted down the order of events, with names and dates, but that, of course, I fear I cannot show even to you. However, I know the story well, and you may rely on the main facts.

"I must tell you first that many years ago now, my friend, who was about forty years old, had lately become a partner in his father's firm: and of course was greatly occupied with all the details of business. It was a broker's firm, well established, and did a good steady business. My friend at that time had no idea of doing any work outside his occupation. I heard him say, in fact,

about this time, that his work seemed to absorb all his energies and capacity. Then the first event of the series took place.

“He was coming home one frosty afternoon in December, between three and four o’clock, on the top of an omnibus. He was sitting in front and looking about him. He noticed a poorly-dressed man standing on the pavement on the right-hand side, as if he wished to cross. Then he began to cross, and came at last right up to the omnibus on which my friend was sitting, and paused a moment to let it pass. As he stood there, my friend watching him with that listless interest with which a tired man will observe details, a hansom cab moving quickly came in the opposite direction. It seemed as if the horse would run the man down. It was too sudden to warn him, but the man saw it, and to avoid the horse sprang quickly forward, his head half turned away, and his feet came between the front and back wheels of the omnibus. There was a jolt and a terrible scream, and my friend, horrified, leant far over the side to see. When the omnibus had passed the man stood for a moment on his crushed feet, and then swayed forward and fell on his face. My friend started up and made a movement to go to him, but several others had seen the accident and ran to the man. And a policeman was crossing quickly from the other side, so he sat down again and the omnibus carried him on.

“Now this horrible thing remained in my friend’s mind, haunted him, shocked him profoundly. He could not forget the terrible face of pain that he had seen upturned for an instant, and his imagination carried him on in spite of himself to dwell on the details of those crushed feet. He wrote me a long letter a week or two afterwards, minutely describing all that I have told you.

“The following summer he was going down to the Kennington Oval one Saturday afternoon to see the close of some famous cricket match. He travelled by the Underground Railway as far as Westminster, and from there determined to walk at least across the Bridge. He walked on the right-hand side, and had reached the steps of St. Thomas’ Hospital. He waited here a moment undecided whether to walk on or drive.

“As he waited, he half turned and saw a beggar sitting in the angle between the steps and the wall. There was a white dog beside him. The beggar’s face was partly bandaged; but what caught my friend’s attention most were his two hands. They were lying palms downwards on the beggar’s knees, bandaged like his face, but in the centre of each was a dark spot, showing through the wrapping, as if there were a festering wound that soaked through from underneath. My friend looked at him in disgust for a moment: but terribly fascinated by those quiet suffering hands; and then he passed on. But during all that afternoon he could not forget those hands. I daresay he was overwrought and nervous. But his memory, too, went back to the accident by the Marble Arch. That night, too, as he told me in a conversation afterwards, as he tossed about, his windows wide open to catch the night air, half waking visions kept moving before him of a man with crushed feet and bandaged hands, who moaned and lifted a drawn face to the sky.

“Early that autumn he was alone, except for the servants, in his father’s house in London. A maid was taken ill. I forget the nature of the illness, but perhaps you will be able to identify it when I have finished. At any rate the girl grew quickly worse. One morning just before he started to the City the doctor, who had called early that morning, asked to have a word with him, and told him he thought he ought to operate immediately, and asked for his sanction.

“ ‘Well,’ said my friend, ‘of course I must speak to the girl about it. Have you told her yet?’

“ ‘No,’ said the doctor, ‘I thought I should mention it to you first. I understand that the girl has no relations in the world.’

“ ‘Can you tell me the nature of the operation?’ asked my friend.

“ ‘It is not really serious. It is an incision in the right side,’ and he added a few details explaining the case.

“ ‘Well,’ said my friend, we had better go upstairs together.’

“They went up and found the girl perfectly conscious and reasonable. She consented to the operation, which was fixed for that evening.

“But all that day the picture floated before his eyes of the quiet room at the top of the house, and the girl lying there waiting. And then the scene would shift a little. And he would see the girl after it was over, with a bandage against her side, and the knowledge of the little wound beneath. When he reached home, late in the evening, the doctor was waiting for him.

“ ‘It has been perfectly successful,’ he said, ‘and I think she will recover.’

“Now, that evening, as my friend sat at the dinner table alone, smoking and thinking, his old experiences came to his mind again. In less than a year he had seen three things, none of which seemed to have any very close relation to him, but each of which had deeply affected him. He told me afterwards that he began to suspect a design underlying them; but he had not a glimmer of light, strange as it may seem to you and me, as to the nature of that design. Within a month, however, I received a letter from him, from some place in the country where he was staying, describing the following incident.

“He had gone down from a Saturday to Monday to a friend’s house in Surrey. On the Sunday afternoon he and his friend went for a walk through some woods. Autumn was in full glory, and the trees were blazing in red and gold: and the bramble branches were weighed down with purple fruit. As they walked together along a grass ride they heard shouts and laughter of children in the woods on one side. They could hear footsteps pattering through dry leaves, and the tearing and trampling of brushwood; and in a moment more a boy burst out of the thin hedge, tripped in a bramble, and rolled into the grass walk. He was up again in a moment laughing and flushed, but my friend saw across his forehead a little thin red dotted line where a thorn had scratched him. As the boy laughed up into their faces, he lifted his hand to his forehead.

“ ‘Why it’s wet,’ he said, and then, looking at his fingers: ‘Why, it’s blood! I’ve scratched myself.’

“Other footsteps came running through the undergrowth, and the boy himself ran off down the road, and the footsteps in the wood stopped, retraced themselves and died away in faint rustlings up the hill. But as my friend had looked he had seen in his memory those other experiences of the last year. And all seemed to concentrate themselves on one Figure—with wounded feet and hands and side—and a torn forehead.

“My friend stood quiet so long that his companion spoke to him and touched his arm.

“ ‘Yes, I am ready,’ he said; ‘let us go home.’

“The end of the letter I cannot quote to you. It is too intimate and personal. But it ended with a request to myself to give him an introduction to some friend who would give him work to do in some poor district. And work of that kind he has carried on ever since.”

The old priest’s voice ceased.

“There is one thing my friend did not know,” he said after a moment. “When that particular operation on the side is performed, of which I have spoken, there comes out blood and water. A doctor will tell you so.”

And then:

“That is my friend’s story,” he said. “Do you not think it remarkable?”