

XIII. THE CONSCIENCE CASE OF DAVID BELL

Eben Bell came in with an armful of wood and banged it cheerfully down in the box behind the glowing Waterloo stove, which was coloring the heart of the little kitchen's gloom with tremulous, rose-red whirls of light.

"There, sis, that's the last chore on my list. Bob's milking. Nothing more for me to do but put on my white collar for meeting. Avonlea is more than lively since the evangelist came, ain't it, though!"

Mollie Bell nodded. She was curling her hair before the tiny mirror that hung on the whitewashed wall and distorted her round, pink-and-white face into a grotesque caricature.

"Wonder who'll stand up to-night," said Eben reflectively, sitting down on the edge of the wood-box. "There ain't many sinners left in Avonlea--only a few hardened chaps like myself."

"You shouldn't talk like that," said Mollie rebukingly. "What if father heard you?"

"Father wouldn't hear me if I shouted it in his ear," returned Eben. "He goes around, these days, like a man in a dream and a mighty bad dream at that. Father has always been a good man."

What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know," said Mollie, dropping her voice. "Mother is dreadfully worried over him. And everybody is talking, Eb. It just makes me squirm. Flora Jane Fletcher asked me last night why father never testified, and him one of the elders. She said the minister was perplexed about it. I felt my face getting red."

"Why didn't you tell her it was no business of hers?" said Eben angrily. "Old Flora Jane had better mind her own business."

"But all the folks are talking about it, Eb. And mother is fretting her heart out over it. Father has never acted like himself since these meetings began. He just goes there night after night, and sits like a mummy, with his head down. And almost everybody else in Avonlea has testified."

"Oh, no, there's lots haven't," said Eben. "Matthew Cuthbert never has, nor Uncle Elisha, nor any of the Whites."

"But everybody knows they don't believe in getting up and testifying, so nobody wonders when they don't. Besides," Mollie laughed--"Matthew could never get a word out in public, if he did believe in it. He'd be too shy. But," she added with a sigh, "it isn't that way with father. He believes in testimony, so

people wonder why he doesn't get up. Why, even old Josiah Sloane gets up every night."

"With his whiskers sticking out every which way, and his hair ditto," interjected the graceless Eben.

"When the minister calls for testimonials and all the folks look at our pew, I feel ready to sink through the floor for shame," sighed Mollie. "If father would get up just once!"

Miriam Bell entered the kitchen. She was ready for the meeting, to which Major Spencer was to take her. She was a tall, pale girl, with a serious face, and dark, thoughtful eyes, totally unlike Mollie. She had "come under conviction" during the meetings, and had stood up for prayer and testimony several times. The evangelist thought her very spiritual. She heard Mollie's concluding sentence and spoke reprovably.

"You shouldn't criticize your father, Mollie. It isn't for you to judge him."

Eben had hastily slipped out. He was afraid Miriam would begin talking religion to him if he stayed. He had with difficulty escaped from an exhortation by Robert in the cow-stable. There was no peace in Avonlea for the unregenerate, he reflected.

Robert and Miriam had both "come out," and Mollie was hovering on

the brink.

"Dad and I are the black sheep of the family," he said, with a laugh, for which he at once felt guilty. Eben had been brought up with a strict reverence for all religious matters. On the surface he might sometimes laugh at them, but the deeps troubled him whenever he did so.

Indoors, Miriam touched her younger sister's shoulder and looked at her affectionately.

"Won't you decide to-night, Mollie?" she asked, in a voice tremulous with emotion.

Mollie crimsoned and turned her face away uncomfortably. She did not know what answer to make, and was glad that a jingle of bells outside saved her the necessity of replying.

"There's your beau, Miriam," she said, as she darted into the sitting room.

Soon after, Eben brought the family pung and his chubby red mare to the door for Mollie. He had not as yet attained to the dignity of a cutter of his own. That was for his elder brother, Robert, who presently came out in his new fur coat and drove dashingly away with bells and glitter.

"Thinks he's the people," remarked Eben, with a fraternal grin.

The rich winter twilight was purpling over the white world as they drove down the lane under the over-arching wild cherry trees that glittered with gemmy hoar-frost. The snow creaked and crisped under the runners. A shrill wind was keening in the leafless dogwoods. Over the trees the sky was a dome of silver, with a lucent star or two on the slope of the west. Earth-stars gleamed warmly out here and there, where homesteads were tucked snugly away in their orchards or groves of birch.

"The church will be jammed to-night," said Eben. "It's so fine that folks will come from near and far. Guess it'll be exciting."

"If only father would testify!" sighed Mollie, from the bottom of the pung, where she was snuggled amid furs and straw. "Miriam can say what she likes, but I do feels as if we were all disgraced. It sends a creep all over me to hear Mr. Bentley say, 'Now, isn't there one more to say a word for Jesus?' and look right over at father."

Eben flicked his mare with his whip, and she broke into a trot. The silence was filled with a faint, fairy-like melody from afar down the road where a pungful of young folks from White Sands

were singing hymns on their way to meeting.

"Look here, Mollie," said Eben awkwardly at last, "are you going to stand up for prayers to-night?"

"I--I can't as long as father acts this way," answered Mollie, in a choked voice. "I--I want to, Eb, and Mirry and Bob want me to, but I can't. I do hope that the evangelist won't come and talk to me special to-night. I always feels as if I was being pulled two different ways, when he does."

Back in the kitchen at home Mrs. Bell was waiting for her husband to bring the horse to the door. She was a slight, dark-eyed little woman, with thin, vivid-red cheeks. From out of the swathings in which she had wrapped her bonnet, her face gleamed sad and troubled. Now and then she sighed heavily.

The cat came to her from under the stove, languidly stretching himself, and yawning until all the red cavern of his mouth and throat was revealed. At the moment he had an uncanny resemblance to Elder Joseph Blewett of White Sands--Roaring Joe, the irreverent boys called him--when he grew excited and shouted. Mrs. Bell saw it--and then reproached herself for the sacrilege.

"But it's no wonder I've wicked thoughts," she said, wearily.

"I'm that worried I ain't rightly myself. If he would only tell

me what the trouble is, maybe I could help him. At any rate, I'd KNOW. It hurts me so to see him going about, day after day, with his head hanging and that look on his face, as if he had something fearful on his conscience--him that never harmed a living soul. And then the way he groans and mutters in his sleep! He has always lived a just, upright life. He hasn't no right to go on like this, disgracing his family."

Mrs. Bell's angry sob was cut short by the sleigh at the door. Her husband poked in his busy, iron-gray head and said, "Now, mother." He helped her into the sleigh, tucked the rugs warmly around her, and put a hot brick at her feet. His solicitude hurt her. It was all for her material comfort. It did not matter to him what mental agony she might suffer over his strange attitude. For the first time in their married life Mary Bell felt resentment against her husband.

They drove along in silence, past the snow-powdered hedges of spruce, and under the arches of the forest roadways. They were late, and a great stillness was over all the land. David Bell never spoke. All his usual cheerful talkativeness had disappeared since the revival meetings had begun in Avonlea. From the first he had gone about as a man over whom some strange doom is impending, seemingly oblivious to all that might be said or thought of him in his own family or in the church. Mary Bell thought she would go out of her mind if her husband continued to

act in this way. Her reflections were bitter and rebellious as they sped along through the glittering night of the winter's prime.

"I don't get one bit of good out of the meetings," she thought resentfully. "There ain't any peace or joy for me, not even in testifying myself, when David sits there like a stick or stone. If he'd been opposed to the revivalist coming here, like old Uncle Jerry, or if he didn't believe in public testimony, I wouldn't mind. I'd understand. But, as it is, I feel dreadful humiliated."

Revival meetings had never been held in Avonlea before. "Uncle" Jerry MacPherson, who was the supreme local authority in church matters, taking precedence of even the minister, had been uncompromisingly opposed to them. He was a stern, deeply religious Scotchman, with a horror of the emotional form of religion. As long as Uncle Jerry's spare, ascetic form and deeply-graved square-jawed face filled his accustomed corner by the northwest window of Avonlea church no revivalist might venture therein, although the majority of the congregation, including the minister, would have welcomed one warmly.

But now Uncle Jerry was sleeping peacefully under the tangled grasses and white snows of the burying ground, and, if dead people ever do turn in their graves, Uncle Jerry might well have

turned in his when the revivalist came to Avonlea church, and there followed the emotional services, public testimonies, and religious excitement which the old man's sturdy soul had always abhorred.

Avonlea was a good field for an evangelist. The Rev. Geoffrey Mountain, who came to assist the Avonlea minister in revivifying the dry bones thereof, knew this and reveled in the knowledge. It was not often that such a virgin parish could be found nowadays, with scores of impressionable, unspoiled souls on which fervid oratory could play skillfully, as a master on a mighty organ, until every note in them thrilled to life and utterance. The Rev. Geoffrey Mountain was a good man; of the earth, earthy, to be sure, but with an unquestionable sincerity of belief and purpose which went far to counterbalance the sensationalism of some of his methods.

He was large and handsome, with a marvelously sweet and winning voice--a voice that could melt into irresistible tenderness, or swell into sonorous appeal and condemnation, or ring like a trumpet calling to battle.

His frequent grammatical errors, and lapses into vulgarity, counted for nothing against its charm, and the most commonplace words in the world would have borrowed much of the power of real oratory from its magic. He knew its value and used it

effectively--perhaps even ostentatiously.

Geoffrey Mountain's religion and methods, like the man himself, were showy, but, of their kind, sincere, and, though the good he accomplished might not be unmixed, it was a quantity to be reckoned with.

So the Rev. Geoffrey Mountain came to Avonlea, conquering and to conquer. Night after night the church was crowded with eager listeners, who hung breathlessly on his words and wept and thrilled and exulted as he willed. Into many young souls his appeals and warnings burned their way, and each night they rose for prayer in response to his invitation. Older Christians, too, took on a new lease of intensity, and even the unregenerate and the scoffers found a certain fascination in the meetings. Threading through it all, for old and young, converted and unconverted, was an unacknowledged feeling for religious dissipation. Avonlea was a quiet place,--and the revival meetings were lively.

When David and Mary Bell reached the church the services had begun, and they heard the refrain of a hallelujah hymn as they were crossing Harmon Andrews' field. David Bell left his wife at the platform and drove to the horse-shed.

Mrs. Bell unwound the scarf from her bonnet and shook the frost

crystals from it. In the porch Flora Jane Fletcher and her sister, Mrs. Harmon Andrews, were talking in low whispers. Presently Flora Jane put out her lank, cashmere-gloved hand and plucked Mrs. Bell's shawl.

"Mary, is the elder going to testify to-night?" she asked, in a shrill whisper.

Mrs. Bell winced. She would have given much to be able to answer "Yes," but she had to say stiffly,

"I don't know."

Flora Jane lifted her chin.

"Well, Mrs. Bell, I only asked because every one thinks it is strange he doesn't--and an elder, of all people. It looks as if he didn't think himself a Christian, you know. Of course, we all know better, but it LOOKS that way. If I was you, I'd tell him folks was talking about it. Mr. Bentley says it is hindering the full success of the meetings."

Mrs. Bell turned on her tormentor in swift anger. She might resent her husband's strange behavior herself, but nobody else should dare to criticize him to her.

"I don't think you need to worry yourself about the elder, Flora Jane," she said bitingly. "Maybe 'tisn't the best Christians that do the most talking about it always. I guess, as far as living up to his profession goes, the elder will compare pretty favorably with Levi Boulter, who gets up and testifies every night, and cheats the very eye-teeth out of people in the daytime."

Levi Boulter was a middle-aged widower, with a large family, who was supposed to have cast a matrimonial eye Flora Janeward. The use of his name was an effective thrust on Mrs. Bell's part, and silenced Flora Jane. Too angry for speech she seized her sister's arm and hurried her into church.

But her victory could not remove from Mary Bell's soul the sting implanted there by Flora Jane's words. When her husband came up to the platform she put her hand on his snowy arm appealingly.

"Oh, David, won't you get up to-night? I do feel so dreadful bad--folks are talking so--I just feel humiliated."

David Bell hung his head like a shamed schoolboy.

"I can't, Mary," he said huskily. "'Tain't no use to pester me."

"You don't care for my feelings," said his wife bitterly. "And

Mollie won't come out because you're acting so. You're keeping her back from salvation. And you're hindering the success of the revival--Mr. Bentley says so."

David Bell groaned. This sign of suffering wrung his wife's heart. With quick contrition she whispered,

"There, never mind, David. I oughtn't to have spoken to you so. You know your duty best. Let's go in."

"Wait." His voice was imploring.

"Mary, is it true that Mollie won't come out because of me? Am I standing in my child's light?"

"I--don't--know. I guess not. Mollie's just a foolish young girl yet. Never mind--come in."

He followed her dejectedly in, and up the aisle to their pew in the center of the church. The building was warm and crowded. The pastor was reading the Bible lesson for the evening. In the choir, behind him, David Bell saw Mollie's girlish face, tinged with a troubled seriousness. His own wind-ruddy face and bushy gray eyebrows worked convulsively with his inward throes. A sigh that was almost a groan burst from him.

"I'll have to do it," he said to himself in agony.

When several more hymns had been sung, and late arrivals began to pack the aisles, the evangelist arose. His style for the evening was the tender, the pleading, the solemn. He modulated his tones to marvelous sweetness, and sent them thrillingly over the breathless pews, entangling the hearts and souls of his listeners in a mesh of subtle emotion. Many of the women began to cry softly. Fervent amens broke from some of the members. When the evangelist sat down, after a closing appeal which, in its way, was a masterpiece, an audible sigh of relieved tension passed like a wave over the audience.

After prayer the pastor made the usual request that, if any of those present wished to come out on the side of Christ, they would signify the wish by rising for a moment in their places. After a brief interval, a pale boy under the gallery rose, followed by an old man at the top of the church. A frightened, sweet-faced child of twelve got tremblingly upon her feet, and a dramatic thrill passed over the congregation when her mother suddenly stood up beside her. The evangelist's "Thank God" was hearty and insistent.

David Bell looked almost imploringly at Mollie; but she kept her seat, with downcast eyes. Over in the big square "stone pew" he saw Eben bending forward, with his elbows on his knees, gazing

frowningly at the floor.

"I'm a stumbling block to them both," he thought bitterly.

A hymn was sung and prayer offered for those under conviction. Then testimonies were called for. The evangelist asked for them in tones which made it seem a personal request to every one in that building.

Many testimonies followed, each infused with the personality of the giver. Most of them were brief and stereotyped. Finally a pause ensued. The evangelist swept the pews with his kindling eyes and exclaimed, appealingly,

"Has EVERY Christian in this church to-night spoken a word for his Master?"

There were many who had not testified, but every eye in the building followed the pastor's accusing glance to the Bell pew. Mollie crimsoned with shame. Mrs. Bell cowered visibly.

Although everybody looked thus at David Bell, nobody now expected him to testify. When he rose to his feet, a murmur of surprise passed over the audience, followed by a silence so complete as to be terrible. To David Bell it seemed to possess the awe of final judgment.

Twice he opened his lips, and tried vainly to speak. The third time he succeeded; but his voice sounded strangely in his own ears. He gripped the back of the pew before him with his knotty hands, and fixed his eyes unseeingly on the Christian Endeavor pledge that hung over the heads of the choir.

"Brethren and sisters," he said hoarsely, "before I can say a word of Christian testimony here to-night I've got something to confess. It's been lying hard and heavy on my conscience ever since these meetings begun. As long as I kept silence about it I couldn't get up and bear witness for Christ. Many of you have expected me to do it. Maybe I've been a stumbling block to some of you. This season of revival has brought no blessing to me because of my sin, which I repented of, but tried to conceal. There has been a spiritual darkness over me.

"Friends and neighbors, I have always been held by you as an honest man. It was the shame of having you know I was not which has kept me back from open confession and testimony. Just afore these meetings commenced I come home from town one night and found that somebody had passed a counterfeit ten-dollar bill on me. Then Satan entered into me and possessed me. When Mrs. Rachel Lynde come next day, collecting for foreign missions, I give her that ten dollar bill. She never knowed the difference, and sent it away with the rest. But I knew I'd done a mean and

sinful thing. I couldn't drive it out of my thoughts. A few days afterwards I went down to Mrs. Rachel's and give her ten good dollars for the fund. I told her I had come to the conclusion I ought to give more than ten dollars, out of my abundance, to the Lord. That was a lie. Mrs. Lynde thought I was a generous man, and I felt ashamed to look her in the face. But I'd done what I could to right the wrong, and I thought it would be all right. But it wasn't. I've never known a minute's peace of mind or conscience since. I tried to cheat the Lord, and then tried to patch it up by doing something that redounded to my worldly credit. When these meetings begun, and everybody expected me to testify, I couldn't do it. It would have seemed like blasphemy. And I couldn't endure the thought of telling what I'd done, either. I argued it all out a thousand times that I hadn't done any real harm after all, but it was no use. I've been so wrapped up in my own brooding and misery that I didn't realize I was inflicting suffering on those dear to me by my conduct, and, maybe, holding some of them back from the paths of salvation. But my eyes have been opened to this to-night, and the Lord has given me strength to confess my sin and glorify His holy name."

The broken tones ceased, and David Bell sat down, wiping the great drops of perspiration from his brow. To a man of his training, and cast of thought, no ordeal could be more terrible than that through which he had just passed. But underneath the

turmoil of his emotion he felt a great calm and peace, threaded with the exultation of a hard-won spiritual victory.

Over the church was a solemn hush. The evangelist's "amen" was not spoken with his usual unctuous fervor, but very gently and reverently. In spite of his coarse fiber, he could appreciate the nobility behind such a confession as this, and the deeps of stern suffering it sounded.

Before the last prayer the pastor paused and looked around.

"Is there yet one," he asked gently, "who wishes to be especially remembered in our concluding prayer?"

For a moment nobody moved. Then Mollie Bell stood up in the choir seat, and, down by the stove, Eben, his flushed, boyish face held high, rose sturdily to his feet in the midst of his companions.

"Thank God," whispered Mary Bell.

"Amen," said her husband huskily.

"Let us pray," said Mr. Bentley.