

CHARLEY THE SWEDE;

OR,

GOOD AND BAD YEARS IN A HOP-GARDEN.



ALL who live in the hop-growing counties of England know what a constant subject of talk and anxious watching, almost all the year round, are the hops with both growers and pickers. The poor people depend so much on the money they can earn by hop-picking for paying their rent, and shoe and doctors' bills, that "a good year" is of great importance to them; and I do not know a prettier sight than a hop-garden on a sunny day in such a year when the hop-picking is going on. Men, women, and children are all the day long working, laughing, and talking; and a stranger walking through the garden would think they were the happiest people in the world. But let that

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same stranger gō amongst those same people in a bad year, on a cold, wet day, and he will have quite different thoughts. The men and women are silent and down-hearted, the children are cross, and the babies cry; and if those who are better off did but know what it is "to live from hand to mouth," as the poor do, they would not wonder at their troubled looks, when this one hope fails of paying their bills, and getting a few little comforts for the coming winter.

Now, my dear friends, it is just because, having lived so many years in Kent, I know what a trial a bad year is, that I want to tell you about a hop-picker I knew, who was called "Charley the Swede;" and how he found "a bad year" to be the "best year" he had ever known in his life.

Charley was a native of Sweden. He came to England when quite a young man, and having soon after married an English girl, he did not care to go back again. He and his wife were an unsettled, roving couple, and first appeared in our village with a knife and scissors-grinding machine. For three or four years they came just before the hop-picking, and always got work in a garden close to our house.

Charley was a short, square-built man, with a good-humoured face and plenty of sandy hair and whiskers. His wife looked much older than he did, and was a dark, untidy woman, with a pipe always in her mouth. Charley could read, but his wife could not; and the general feeling was, that he had been brought up in a much more respectable way than she had, and that he didn't particularly care to take her back to Sweden, to show to his friends as his wife.

It was during the hop-picking time one "bad year," that my eldest brother came home to stay a few weeks with us; and as he never seemed happy unless trying to do good to some one, he spent a part of every day in the hop-garden. He said, "The Lord tells us to work while it is day, 'and to sow beside all waters;'"

and so, with his Bible in his hand, he would go from bin to bin, sometimes reading to the people; sometimes talking kindly to them about the trial a bad year must be to them, and how the Lord knew all about it, and had some good reason for allowing that, as well as other trials, to come. Sympathy is always soothing, and it was sometimes remarked,—“Well, the hops are very bad this year, certainly; but that young man seems to know how to give a deal of comfort to people in trouble;” and one poor woman said, “Maybe the Lord has sent him to tell us where to look for comfort—who knows?”

Before the hop-picking was over, Charley had no doubt who it was that had sent him. In talking to him, at first, my brother soon found that though he lived what is called a respectable life, he never troubled himself about anything but just from day to day getting enough to eat and drink, or, as he expressed it, “to keep body and soul together.”

“But,” said my brother, “body and soul won’t always keep together; and when your body dies, and is buried, what will become of your soul?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, sir,” said Charley; “I’ve never thought about it this many a year.”

But from that moment he seemed to be always thinking about it, though he did not say much. He was not a great talker; but my brother found that day by day he listened more and more anxiously to all he said about “sin, repentance, death, and the judgment to come.”

One morning my brother said, “Charley, do you know what I mean by being a sinner? You tell me you have not done anything very bad; but have you ever in your life done anything wrong?”

“Oh dear yes, sir; no end of things.”

“Did you ever ask God to forgive you?”

“No, never.”

“Why not?”

“I never thought about Him.”

"What makes you think about Him now?"

"Because you are always talking to us about Him, I suppose, sir."

"Well, Charley, now you have begun to think about God, I hope you will never leave off; but thinking only will not do you any good. You must talk to Him."

"Talk to God, sir; how can I do that?"

"Just as if you were now to shut your eyes and go on talking to me; you would know that though you could not see me, I am near you, and can hear all you say. The Bible tells us that God is very near to every one of us, and that He not only hears all we say, but that He even knows every secret thought in our hearts, which perhaps we have never said a word about to any one. What a wonderful thing, then, that this great God, who is so holy that even 'the heavens are not clean in His sight,' wishes us to talk to Him; and says, if we confess our sins, He will, for Christ's sake, forgive us everything; and that if we will only believe what He says and do as He tells us to do, He will take care of us while we live, and take us to heaven when we die."

If I were to try, I could not write half the conversations that took place between my brother and Charley; but before long it was manifest that a great change had passed over the soul of Charley: and there could be no reason to doubt that the Holy Spirit was effectually convincing him of his need of Christ's mercy, and was leading him to the foot of the cross. More than this, Charley's wife also became deeply impressed with the importance of true, heartfelt religion.

They were a poor, solitary couple, and, as the wife said one day, "We didn't think anybody cared whether it was a good year or a bad one to us." To be told, therefore, that the Lord not only cared for them, but loved them, seemed such a comfort that they said they "believed this bad year would turn out to have

been the best year they had ever known in their lives."

One morning, my brother, while sitting on the bin and picking a few hops, said, "You tell me, Charley, that you used to read the Bible at school, when you were a boy: do these hops remind you of anything you ever read there?"

"No, sir; there's nothing about hops in the Bible, is there?"

"No, Charley; but there is a great deal about a plant that in some respects is not unlike it; and that is the vine. And I have sometimes wondered that people can go on picking hops year after year, and never seem to think of the likeness. I will read to you what our Lord says, in the 15th chapter of St. John, 'I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit. But if a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.'"

My brother then went on to point out the resemblance between the two plants, and to show how useless both a grape and a hop vine would be if only green leaves were found on the branches. "What a solemn thing," he added, "for you and me to know that the Lord Jesus Christ likens us to branches, and that if we do not bear any fruit, we shall be plucked off and burnt in the fire!"

"But, sir," cried Charley, "how can we bear fruit?"

My brother explained to him that "fruit" in Scripture means "good works," or "bad works," because men show what they are by what they do. So we say, he is "a good man" or a "bad man," according to his way of living.

Charley looked very serious, and said, "It isn't much good I've ever done in my life, sir, I am afraid."

"You were not likely to, Charley, all the while you lived, as you say you did, without reading

your Bible, or even thinking about God in any way. The wonder to me is that you haven't done some very bad things, such as stealing or drinking; for when a man lives without God, he is like a leaf off a tree, at the mercy of every wind that blows, and nobody knows where it may go to. You know what (I read it to you just now) our Lord says about 'abiding in Him.'"

"I don't think I quite understand what it means, sir."

"It means that like as the branch is safe on the stem, and the leaf is safe on the tree, so we are safe all the while we cling to and keep close to Christ. But separated from Him we can do nothing good, and are every moment of our lives in danger of dying as unforgiven sinners, and so being separated from Him for ever. Life is so uncertain that none of us can make sure of living a moment, and if we are not abiding in Christ, when we die we are separated from Him. And as we die so shall we be 'for ever and ever.' I should like you to learn these four lines, because they are so solemn and true :

"As the tree falls, so will it lie;
As the man lives, so will he die;
As the man dies, so will he be
All through the days of eternity."

The reader will not be surprised at the daily increasing interest my brother felt in poor Charley, especially as he thought he would soon be going away, and then he might never see him again. But Charley and his wife had also taken a great fancy to my brother; and so, at the end of the hop-picking, they asked if they might put up their little tent under a hedge in one of my father's fields. They said, with their grinding machine, they could get a living if he would now and then give them a day's work. My father was quite willing to do so, and these two poor people lived "very comfortably" in this way for four months. They both went to public

worship every Sunday, and Charley read his Bible to his wife.

They might have lived there much longer, had it not been for a violent snow-storm which came on one night in January. The wind being high, they were in a few hours nearly buried alive in a snow-drift; so that it was not thought safe to let them remain there. My father, therefore, offered to find a small room in a cottage for them, when, to his great surprise, Charley said that for the last few weeks he had been thinking a good deal about going back to Sweden, and that his wife was quite willing to go. He wanted to see if his father and mother, or any of his relations were living. He wanted to tell them about the "bad year" in a hop-garden in England, and that it had been the best year in his life to him, for he had then begun to think of God and his soul; and that a few bad years of any sort in this world don't signify much, if we can only make sure of going to heaven when we die. He said he did so wish he could have a Swedish Bible to take with him, but he did not know how or where to get one. My father told him of that wonderful Society in London,* where a Bible in almost every known language upon earth may be had; and promised to write about one for him.

In a few days, a note came from the secretary of the Bible Society, expressing great interest in what he had heard about Charley, and that the Society would like to make him a present of a Bible.

As soon as we could, we got up a small subscription to pay the expenses of his journey and sea passage; and early one morning these two poor people left our village, carrying all their worldly goods on their backs, but with a treasure in their hearts which no money could buy—the love of Him who died to save them, and who they knew would prepare a place for them in the "home" above, a "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

* The British and Foreign Bible Society.

My friends, what lesson should this simple story teach us? Does it not tell us that what so often seems to be "all bad," may turn out in the end to have been "a blessing in disguise"—a cloud with a silver lining?—that when sometimes we feel inclined to sit down in despair and say, with Jacob, "All these things are against me," by-and-by, we find out that "all these things" were working together for our good? May not "bad years" in a hop-garden, or "bad years" in any other occupation, be allowed, as all other troubles are, to tell us not to set our hearts and hopes too much on anything in this world; for earthly pleasures, as well as trials, can only last for a few years; while there are joys and sorrows which will never end, in that other life to which we are all fast hastening?—that those who live in tents here may live in mansions there, if only they will repent, and pray, and trust their all to Him who says, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden (with sin or sorrow), and I will give thee rest?"

Does it not also teach us that we should try to "sow beside all waters;" for who can tell but that God may make us the blessed means of leading some poor thoughtless sinner to the Saviour, as my brother led "Charley the Swede?" Let us think of that beautiful text, "They who turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever." And to turn *one* is quite likely, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to turn many, because that one will do as Charley did—go to his home and friends and say, "See what the Lord has done for me; come with us, and we will do thee good."