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MALCOM KIRK.

A Tale of Moral Heroism in Overcoming the World.

BY CHARLES M. SHELDON,

Author of "In His Steps," "Crucifixion of Philip Strong," "Robert Hardy's Seven Days."

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Illustrations by Herman Heyer.

CHAPTER I.

The senior class in the theological seminary at Hermon had just had its picture taken by the photographer, and the members were still grouped about the steps of the chapel.

"There's one thing the photographer forgot," said a short, red faced man who sat in the middle of the group. "He didn't think to say, 'Look pleasant, now, if you please.'"

"He didn't need to. We all look so, anyhow." The man who spoke sat immediately behind the first speaker and had his hands on the other's shoulders.

"I'm sure we don't feel very pleasant. I mean, we are not pleased to think this is almost the last time we shall be together as a class," said a tall, delicate, pale faced man who was standing up at the top of the steps with his back against the door.

He spoke in a quiet, low voice, and there was a hush after he spoke. There is as much sentiment among theological students as among any average number of professional men. In some directions there is more than among the like number of law or medical students.

After a moment of silence some one began to ask questions about the future prospects of the class. The red faced, jolly looking young man in the center was going to take a church in northern Vermont. The man just behind him had received a call as assistant pastor of an institutional church in Philadelphia. The delicate featured student up by the chapel door was going to teach school a year and find a church as soon as he had paid off his college debts.

Every member of the class had spoken of his prospects except one. This one sat on the extreme edge of the group, as if he had purposely chosen to be as inconspicuous as possible in the picture. A stranger carelessly walking by would have instantly judged him to be the homeliest, least interesting man in the class. He had dull brown hair, very heavy and stiff, pale blue eyes, a rather large mouth, the lips of which, however, were firm and full of character, high cheek bones and an unusually high forehead. His arms and legs were very long, and his general attitude, as he sat on the edge of the steps, was almost strikingly awkward.

"Here's Kirk; hasn't said a word yet," cried the little man who had first spoken. "What are you going to do, Kirk?"

Every member of the class turned and looked at the figure sitting on the edge of the group. It was noticeable that while several of the class smiled at the question, "What are you going to do?" there was no disrespect in the smile, and an every man's face was a look of real interest, amounting to an excited curiosity.

Malcom Kirk smiled slightly as he looked up. He did not look at any member of the class in particular, but seemed to include them all in a friendly interest that was affectionate and gentle.

"I don't know. I am waiting for a call. I've had one and accepted it, but I need another before I can go to work."

Everybody stared. The man up by the chapel door had a look in his eye as if he understood what Kirk meant, but no one else seemed to catch his meaning.

"My first call was from the Lord, several years ago. I feel perfectly satisfied with it. He wants me to preach. But so far none of the churches seems to agree with him. At least none of them has asked me to preach. So I'm waiting for my second call."

He spoke without the least touch of irreverence or even humor. The impression made on the class was a feeling of honest perplexity concerning the future prospects of Malcom Kirk.

"I don't see," said the man who was to be the assistant pastor of the institutional church in Philadelphia, "why Kirk hasn't had a call to a large church. We all know he has more brains than all the rest of us put together. I think it is a shame the churches should pass by such a man and—"

"It's easy enough to see the reason," Kirk spoke without the shadow of any irritation in his manner. "You fellows know as well as I do that brains under hair like mine don't count with the average city congregation." He laughed good naturedly, and the class joined him. Then some one said:

"Why don't you dye it black, Kirk?"

"I can't afford to," he replied gravely. "That isn't the only reason I don't get a call. I'm too awkward in the pulpit. Did I tell anybody the last time I preached in the Third church at Concord I knocked a vase of flowers off the pulpit with my elbow, and when it fell on the floor it woke up every officer in the church? Of course I never could expect to get a call from that church."

Everybody laughed, and Kirk drew one of his feet up under him and smiled a little. At the same time no one could detect a trace of ill humor or lack of seriousness in his tone or manner. The first impression Malcom Kirk made on people was that of downright sincerity. The longer people knew him the stronger this impression grew.

"That's nothing," exclaimed one of the class after the laugh subsided. "I had a great time two weeks ago when

I went up to Manchester to preach. I laid my notes down on the desk, and there was a strong breeze blowing across the pulpit, which stood directly between two open windows, and while the anthem was being sung half my sermon blew out of one of the windows."

"The congregation was spared just so much, then, wasn't it?" said a man down on the bottom step.

"Accidents will happen to any one," said Kirk quietly. "But nine are not accidents; they're habits of life. I can overcome them, though. The churches don't know that; so I don't blame them for not giving me a call."

"Well, I think it's a shame, as I said," the assistant pastor of the institutional church repeated. "The churches think more of the way a man dresses and behaves in the pulpit than they do of what he says. And they criticize everything from his prayers to the polish of his boots."

There was silence again. The class had been over all that many times before, and they were practically a unit in their opinion of what the churches seemed to demand in a successful candidate for a call.

Finally some one recurred to the class picture again.

"I don't believe Kirk's in this picture at all. He sat too far out. The photographer kept telling him to move in farther. But I believe he moved out again just at the last minute."

"I only moved one of my feet out," said Kirk solemnly. "I thought one of them was solemnly. I didn't want to have to pay extra for more than my share of the photograph."

"But we want the whole of you in the picture, Kirk," said the man next to him, laying an affectionate hand on Kirk's arm. The entire class turned again toward the awkward, shambling figure and seemed to repeat the gesture of the one classmate. Then the talk drifted back again to the future plans of the members and to serious and humorous reminiscences of the three years' course until one after another went away and the class group was broken up into little knots of two and three as the men walked to their rooms or lingered under the great elms, arm in arm.

Kirk and the companion who had laid his hand on his friend's arm remained a little while on the steps.

"What will you do, Kirk?"

"I think I shall offer myself to the Home Missionary society and ask them to send me to the hardest place they can find out west somewhere."

"But how about your scholarship, your—your ability?" The other man hesitated for the right word.

Kirk colored slightly, the first indication he had shown of a sensitiveness in that direction.

"I can use anything I know anywhere. Preach I must, even if I have

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