



"You will know them by their fruits." Mt. 7:16

The Sanctification of The Prodigal

THE ELDER BROTHER

by Thaddeus Constantine Reade

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Those were wondrous days for Brighton – true pentecostal days, when the people were baptized with the Holy Ghost and with power. Through the instrumentality of Hedges, “The Prodigal” was led to see the presence and nature of inbred sin and to seek and obtain the blessing of perfect love, and then these great Bible doctrines, Pardon, Regeneration and Sanctification, were preached in the upper part of the city by Henry Ludwig, with a learning and eloquence that led multitudes into the experience, and in the lower part of the city the same doctrines were preached to the working men by “The Prodigal,” with scarcely less of eloquence and with convincing logic of hard facts that were known by bitter experience to all his hearers, and there, too, multitudes were regenerated and sanctified to God. I cannot take time to follow in detail the developments and happy results of this great and glorious revival in Brighton – the book of the recording angel and the unfolding years of eternity alone can tell the good that was done. But I must not close the story until I have told of the happy death of “The Prodigal.”

It seemed that his dissipated life had undermined his constitution. For months before he was converted he had only

been able to do enough work to pay for his miserable board and lodgings and meet the expenses of the meanest drinks and the poorest tobacco. He was still in the prime of life, but sin had robbed him of character and hope and health and was hurrying him on headlong to death.

After he was converted and had given up his wicked habits, his health seemed to improve, but it was only for a little while. He had a work to do and God lent him strength to do it, but strong drink had attacked every vital organ and his whole body was full of disease. He spoke with a strange force and eloquence, when he had scarcely strength to stand upon his feet. His fame spread throughout the whole city and to adjoining cities, but it was only the transient gleam of a meteor that was soon to be hidden in the night of death. The great mission church was built and paid for, but on the very day it was to have been dedicated and "The Prodigal" was to have preached his first sermon in it, he was carried a corpse from its altar and laid away among the countless dead, to await the resurrection call.

One evening, just before he died, he sent for Hedges, and said: "Brother, you have been a loyal friend, a mighty helper to me, and now before I die I want to ask one last favor. Offer one more of your good, honest, earnest prayers by my bedside; make it mostly thanksgiving, for God is so wondrous good; then sit by my pillow while I preach a sermon and tell you a secret." Hedges prayed and he said he had never been so awed before, with a consciousness that unseen beings were all about him. The angels had come to the dingy room and were waiting to bear "The Prodigal" home.

When the prayer was over "The Prodigal" began. "You remember the night when I was converted.

What a night it was. The power of God shook the whole congregation. Well, you remember that on that occasion Mr. Ludwig preached on a parable of the prodigal son. It was a good sermon, a great sermon, full of burning words and attended with a holy unction, but after all it seems to me the general impression created by the sermon was an erroneous one. I have heard many sermons from that parable and the general effect of them all was the same, and, as I believe, radically wrong. I wish I could live to preach a sermon on that parable. I would like to tell my experience as a prodigal and portray the sad and lasting results of my sinful life. I think it might not only deter some from following in the paths of sin, but it might show the vast merit and the infinite advantage of doing right from one's youth. You see, Hedges, the effect of all the popular sermons on this parable is to excite sympathy for the prodigal. We pity the prodigal. We are told that he was a young man of many noble and generous impulses; that he was large-hearted, easily persuaded, and, in fact, that his sins were those of a hot-headed, impulsive youth, and having repented and having been restored, the evil of his course was all cured and that henceforth he was the favorite son in the family. And then these sermons almost always close with some bitter reflections on the elder brother and he is held up to ridicule and contempt. I would like to tell the people that so far as the evidence goes, the younger son had no more generous impulses, no larger heart, no more temptations than the elder. They were both sharing alike the father's bounty and the father's love, but being tempted, as we all are, the elder brother resisted and the younger gave way. Reversing their ages, it is only another example of the effects of wrong and right choosing like that in the case of Cain and Abel. Abel was the obedient, Cain the disobedient son, the prodigal. I would like to tell them, and hold myself up before them as an object lesson, that when the prodigal does at last return, barely alive and almost starved, he brings all the natural effects of his sins with him, and though he may be forgiven and even sanctified, many of those effects of sin will remain with him till death. Look at me today. I am saved and the wondrous grace of God has purged all sin from my soul, yet I have the eyes, the nose, the cheeks of a drunkard; the lungs, the liver, the stomach, the brain of a drunkard; I have the body of a libertine, and here I am dying thirty years before my time because I was a prodigal son. But this is not all. My sins, like all other sins, have had their effect on others, and while I am pardoned and saved, many whom I have led astray may be lost forever.

"Ah, Hedges, this is the hardest part of it all. I count not my sufferings anything. I could die a thousand deaths if I could but undo the effects of my sins. I can scarcely see how I can be happy in Heaven when those whom I have led into the downward path are languishing in hell." The poor fellow's eyes filled with tears and his utterance was choked. "Oh, God," he gasped, "pity a poor dying man and, so far as possible, counteract the effects of my wicked life. Now," continued The Prodigal, "think how much nobler, how much better the life of the elder brother who continued obedient. He escaped all these sad effects of sin, but instead has built up a noble character, which can only be acquired by years of right living. He has the fruits of righteousness in health, wealth and a good name, and all that makes life desirable. The life of the elder brother has tended to make the world better. He has inspired the

people with honesty, piety and a love of justice. The elder brothers of the land are the strong pillars that hold society together; the prodigals make jails and prisons and alms houses necessary. The elder brothers sustain agriculture, commerce and the schools and the churches; the prodigals support the saloons, the brothels and the gambling houses. Oh that the people would see that while it is right to work for the reclaiming of prodigals, it is far more important to labor to prevent them from becoming prodigals. The most important thing is to fill the earth with elder brothers. Extol the character of the obedient and show the people that 'all that the Father hath is theirs.' And let it be perfectly understood that all the time spent in sinning is doubly lost; it is lost as far as all privileges of good are concerned, and it is lost because the evil that is done can never be recalled. The prodigals may come home. God grant they may all come home and be saved in Heaven, but so far as this world is concerned, their wrecked and shattered lives can be of little use. To show you that all I have said is true and to make the truth doubly impressive by an illustration in point, I will tell you my secret." Hedges had been deeply interested in the new and yet thoroughly sensible and practical comments of his dying friend on the parable of the prodigal son, but bent forward with double interest now to learn the secret of the man whose character seemed so marvelous and yet was such a mystery.

"You have known me as 'The Prodigal'," said the dying man, "for that was the name I assumed when I was converted, but previous to that time I was living here under another assumed name, as I have lived in a dozen other cities under as many different names. I have been a wanderer, a very vagabond, for the last twelve years, homeless, friendless and miserable, until that night when Jesus found me and saved me. But I have a name, the name which my father gave me, and which through all those sad, sinful years I never spoke above a whisper – a name which will surprise you and many others in this city. My name is Ludwig – James Ludwig – the long lost brother of the pastor of the First M. E. Church of Brighton. I am the prodigal; he is 'The Elder Brother'." "What," cried Hedges, springing to his feet, "are you James Ludwig? Are you the erring brother of my beloved pastor? Can it be possible? But I must hasten to tell him, for he sought you long and with tears, and to find you even here will lift an awful burden from his soul." "No, no," said the dying man, "do not go now, but sit down a moment till I tell you my wish. For a few days past it has seemed to me that I had a kind of fore-knowledge; some coming events have seemed as plain and definite to me as anything in the past. You know the awful attack I had yesterday; that dreadful convulsion that almost took my life.

Well, I knew for more than a day beforehand that it was coming and that by the hardest I should get through with it. But tomorrow, between 10 and 11 o'clock, I shall have another convulsion of the same kind, attended with a dreadful hemorrhage – I see the blood running down my pillow and in that convulsion I shall die. Now, I want you to bring my brother here at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning.

I want him to see me alive and talk with me of a few things that happened in our early life before I became so bad. We had a happy, innocent boyhood together, but I must not speak of the dark days since I left the college with the mark of Cain branded in my soul. God has kindly forgiven and blotted out my sin and by His help I shall never refer to it again. Now, Hedges, you dear, blessed brother, you may go, but observe closely what I have said and leave me alone till the appointed hour.

God has promised me a restful night and I shall spend all my waking moments in communing with Him and getting ready for the final hour. My soul is at peace and I am happy in the fact that very soon father and mother will welcome their prodigal boy into the home above."

The next morning at 8 o'clock the door of the sick room opened and Henry Ludwig entered. He was breathless with haste; he was shaking with excitement: he hurried to the bed where the sick man lay, and instantly recognized him, threw his arms about his neck and sobbed, "Oh, James, my brother, my long-lost brother." Then for a little while not a word was spoken, but the brothers wept in each other's arms. Hedges had followed to the door, but felt that he had no right to intrude on a meeting so solemn and so sad. He closed the door gently and waited, wondering whether the prediction of "The Prodigal" would prove true. An hour passed and then Hedges heard the voice of Henry Ludwig reading the twenty-third psalm and offering prayer. Hedges fell upon his knees by the door. He could not hear the words of the prayer, but he felt that he was waiting in the outer court while these two men were talking to God in the Holy of Holies. When the prayer ended he heard James say "Amen," and he, too, said "Amen," and

arose from his knees. Almost immediately after this he heard a deep groan and a hurried and confused noise. He rushed into the room and found poor James in the midst of another convulsion and Henry supporting him in his arms. The muscles of the dying man became rigid, his face became black and his teeth ground together. This lasted for a few moments and then there seemed to be a little relaxation and the dying man gasped, “Good-bye, The Prodigal – has – reached – home.” Then followed another convulsion and in the midst of it the blood came streaming from his mouth and as the paroxysm relaxed his spirit departed to be with God.



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