



## The Doctor's Story

Isabella Alden

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**I** WANT to tell you a story, young man.”

The speaker was the Reverend Joseph Mentor, D. D., a gray-haired, keen-eyed, large-brained, sweet-faced, grand old Christian. He sat in his own parlor, which was not a parlor, after all, but a sort of study; lined with books on every hand, almost crowded with easy chairs; convenient little writing tables occupying cozy corners, with all the appurtenances thereto lavishly furnished, coaxing the privileged guest to write his letters, or arrange his neglected accounts, or read items from the various journals of the day at his elbow, as his taste might dictate.

The present occupants of the room were three; the aforesaid doctor, leaning back at rest in his favorite study chair—his life had been a long, grand one, and if ever a disciple of the Master could afford to rest on earth, the Reverend Joseph Mentor might have claimed the privilege;

yet his very rest was active. The doctor's son, a young man of twenty-five or so, now co-pastor, who had excused himself to their guest in the manner that one may treat guests who are almost as much at home as they are themselves—on the plea that there were two important letters to answer for the evening mail—and then had turned to one of the writing tables, leaving his father to entertain the young man with a pale face and scholarly air, who sat in a half-dejected attitude in the straight-backed, old-fashioned chair near the doctor. It was to him that the old gentleman had turned with the apparently abrupt statement:

“I want to tell you a story, young man!”

That the young man would be glad to hear any story that Doctor Mentor might choose to honor him with was evident from the flash of his eyes and the instant look of interest that overspread his face.

Then the doctor began: “About a month ago I attended the funeral of a man in whom I have taken a deep interest all my life. He was an old man, and a plain man all his long life; yet, though I have attended a great many funerals in the last half century, I don't think I ever saw a greater uprising of the people to offer the last tribute of respect and affection to a plain man in their midst. I want to tell you a little about that man. Miller, his name was, Daniel Miller. He was older than I, and in my young days I used to watch him from his pew in the church. I liked his face, even then, before I knew him; a

grave, half-sad face, yet never gloomy—only a look of patient resignation to the inevitable. A Christian man he was, one of the sterling sort. Talk with anybody in that town about him and they would pay almost instant tribute to his sterling worth and almost always close with, ‘What a pity that such a good man as he is should be so hard of hearing.’

“That was his trouble, and a great trouble it was. I suppose it was the means of breaking in pieces a number of plans of his youth. Well, the thought was written all over his patient, sad face: ‘I am hard of hearing and growing worse. It destroys my usefulness, it hinders my work in every direction, it makes me appear unsocial and unsympathetic. In short, it is a burden hard to be borne.’ As I watched him, I could see that this feeling grew upon him; grew with his infirmity, and that progressed quite rapidly.

“You have no idea, I suppose, what a drawback it was to him on all occasions. It got so that he didn’t dare to open his lips in the prayer meeting. He would look all around him to see whether anybody was speaking, but some of the members had a way of keeping their seats when they talked, so he found that he couldn’t tell by their position, and once or twice he arose and began to pray when someone was talking; he was a different man, and it embarrassed him dreadfully. Then he used to say that he never knew whether what he had to offer was in line with what had been said or was very wide of the mark; and if the minister asked him to

pray, he had to shout out the request, and sometimes poor Mr. Miller couldn't hear it, and his wife would have to give his elbow a nudge and lean over and whisper to him loud enough for all the house to hear, 'He wants you to lead in prayer!'

"It was a real embarrassment all around. People didn't wonder that he gradually grew into the feeling that he couldn't take part very often in religious meetings, though I never thought that was right. I always believed that his prayers would be in line with what the Lord wanted to have said and that he would be safe enough whether he followed the line of the others or not.

"So it went on, Daniel Miller growing deafer and deafer, and the patient, sad look on his face deepening, and the feeling growing in his heart that he wasn't of any use to the church of Christ that he loved with all his soul.

"One day somebody in that church had an inspiration. 'I tell you what it is,' one of the members said, bringing down his doubled-up fist on the seat before him for emphasis, 'I believe we ought to make Daniel Miller our treasurer. That thing would suit him, and he is just the man to do the work.'

"'But Daniel Miller is so deaf,' objected one. 'He grows worse and worse; I notice that his wife always has to find the hymns for him, and the place in the Bible, and point to the text!'

“What if he is deaf?” said his champion. ‘A man doesn’t have to hear in order to add money and keep accounts, and make out bills and send them out, and keep everything straight. I believe it is work that he could do, and I believe it would do him good; make him feel that he can do something for the church, and that we have confidence in him. I tell you what it is, brethren, I’m going to propose his name at our next election.’

“Well, he was as good as his word, and sure enough, all the people said ‘Amen.’ They did it with so much enthusiasm and with such a look on their faces that said, ‘What a splendid idea! I wonder we never thought of it before,’ that there was quite an excitement, and Mrs. Miller looked about her, and the tears began to gather in her eyes, and she put her head down suddenly on the seat in front of her. She was a grand, good woman—a helpmate to her good husband in every sense of the word.

“Well, Daniel Miller looked around with that meek, inquiring look on his face, a little troubled, as much as to say, ‘Are you having a good time, brethren, or is there something going on in the Lord’s house that oughtn’t to be? I’m jealous for his honor; I hope all is well.’

“The chairman got out of his chair of office and went down the aisle, bent over Mr. Miller, and said in a good, loud voice, ‘You have been elected our church treasurer by a unanimous vote.’

“You ought to have seen his face then; it was a picture. It flushed and glowed, and his eyes grew dim, and his lips quivered, and it seemed for a minute that he couldn’t speak at all. Then he stammered out something about not being fitted for the work—his infirmity being so great; he wished he could do something, he would be glad to if he could, but maybe it was a risk to try it.

“Then the chairman put down his mouth to his ear again and called out, ‘We all stand ready to go your security, every one of us.’

“And then, sir, if you will believe it, that decorous assembly, made up of a class of people who believed every one of them is doing things decently and in order, just clapped their hands, and he understood it, and he got out his handkerchief very suddenly. You never saw anything work more like a charm than that arrangement did all around.

“Daniel Miller took hold of the work with a will, I tell you, and the work was never better done. His ‘infirmity’ as he always meekly called it, was a positive advantage to him. There wasn’t any use in trying to *tell* him how the accounts stood, or explain away this or that; he couldn’t hear; it all had to be reduced to writing. And when a man sits down in quiet to make a written account of anything that another man is expected to fully understand, why he uses language carefully, don’t you see? You don’t suppose they were foolish enough when his year was out to go and put in another

treasurer, do you? Not a bit of it; the machine was running too smoothly. They elected him again by as large a vote as before.

“‘It does my heart good,’ one old lady said, ‘to see Daniel Miller go up for the collections on Sunday. He does it with such a glad look on his face, as if he had found out something he could do for the church and do well.’

“‘He did it well, too; no mistakes. By and by he began to send out little notes with his bills: ‘We owe it to our pastor to pay his quarter’s salary on the day promised.’ Well, sir, when the next quarter’s salary was paid the morning of the day on which it was due, without having been asked for or run after, that minister thought the millennium was about to dawn! He hadn’t been used to that sort of thing. You never saw anything like the promptness with which pew rents were paid in the church. If a man was twenty-four hours behind time, he was almost sure to receive a call from Mr. Miller; no writing notes this time. That man understood human nature well. Just imagine a gentleman standing in his store or office and trying to carry on a conversation with Daniel Miller about not having paid his pew rent. ‘Money has been a little short with me lately’ he begins, ‘and I thought a few days’ delay—’

“‘What is it?’ interrupts Daniel with his hand to his ear. ‘I’m hard of hearing, you know; speak a little louder, please.’

“Do you suppose that man is going to yell out for the benefit of the passersby that he is a little short of money and had deliberately planned a few days’ delay for his minister? The way it worked was for him to scream out, ‘You shall have the money at noon today, Mr. Miller.’ Very likely he grumbled that he wouldn’t get caught in that trap again, and he didn’t. People didn’t enjoy calls from Daniel Miller when they owed the church any money. I watched that thing with the greatest interest. It grew all the time. It made a wonderful difference in Daniel’s life; he kept his head straighter and walked faster on the street. The church was large, and there was a good deal of business to be transacted, and Daniel had no temptation to brood over his infirmity. Then he knew just what was going on, just what the church gave to Foreign Missions, and Home Missions, and all benevolences. He had no need any more to wonder painfully what was being done, and after hesitating over it a good while, make up his mind to ask somebody and feel sorry for them all the time to think they had to answer him. Instead, people had to come to him for information. Nothing could be paid for, not a cent of money could be sent anywhere or done anything with unless the thing passed through Daniel Miller’s hands. And I tell you, the treasurer’s reports of that church were curiosities; they were managed with such exactness and clearness. He had a little witch of a daughter—Nettie her name was, as pretty as a picture.

“Do you remember her, my son?”

“Yes, sir, distinctly,” came promptly from the table where the son was writing letters.

And the doctor continued, “Her father made her his clerk almost as soon as she could talk plainly and began to train her up to business habits and business terms; he took her with him a good deal. ‘Daniel Miller’s ears’ we used to call the bright little thing; and she was as bright as a diamond. We used to notice that Daniel could hear to the last better than anybody else, even his wife. ‘She’s got a voice like an angel,’ he said to me once. ‘I know by her that I shall be able to hear the angels.’

“His hearing grew steadily worse. For a good many years he was able to hear some of the sermon, the loud parts as he used to call them, but, by degrees, he lost the power of doing that. ‘Did you hear?’ the minister would shout at him after service as he came up for the collection. He would shake his head, but his eyes would look bright as he answered, ‘No, sir, not with my ears; but I’ve got it here.’ And he would lay his hand on his great, noble heart. It was true, too, and he went out and lived it a great deal better than many who heard everything. You must understand, young man, that I am covering a good deal of ground with this long story. The years went by, and at each election Daniel Miller was reinstated, until at last that congregation would have laughed in the face of any man who had suggested a change.

‘What should we do without Daniel Miller?’ That is as near as they ever came to mentioning the time when they might have to do without him; and the time came when they said that in lowered tones and with a hint of tears, for he was growing to be an old man, and the church couldn’t afford to lose him.

“Bless you! I hope you don’t think that keeping the finances of the church straight was all the man did? It would take all night to tell you half the things that grew out of it; and then it wouldn’t be told; it can’t be. The Lord of the vineyard is the only one who has the whole story. I told you he took to writing little marginal readings on the church bills and receipts. Well, is there any reason why marginal readings on church bills can’t be about other matters than money? The ‘words in season’ that this deaf man spoke in this way in quiet hours to one and another of the flock, and the fruit they bore, I know something of—a good deal of, in fact; but, as I tell you, the Master is the only one who has the entire record.

“One night he had a new idea, or rather he worked out what was to him an old idea. He went on Saturday evening to the parsonage with the quarter’s salary; he apologized for intruding on Saturday, but said he, ‘According to date this money should be paid tomorrow morning, and of course I couldn’t do that, so I made bold to come tonight.’

“Well, he happened to be one of those men who never intrude on a pastor, no matter what time they come; so his pastor told him he was glad to see him and would talk with him while he finished and put up his sermon; but Daniel didn’t seem to want to talk; he watched that sermon with a curious, wistful air. At last he spoke, ‘I’ve been turning a ridiculous idea over in my mind for a long time; I don’t suppose it could be done, but I’ve thought sometimes that I would just like to try an experiment and read over one of your sermons before you preached it and see if I couldn’t follow you from the pulpit better after that.’ It was a queer notion, but it took the pastor’s fancy. The fact was, he loved Daniel Miller so much that almost anything he said took his fancy, and he handed over the sermon and told the old gentleman to try it, by all means, he could have it as well as not. It would have done your heart good to see Daniel Miller’s radiant face the next day. ‘It worked, sir, it worked!’ he said to the pastor, and he rubbed his hands together like a gleeful boy. ‘I could follow you right along a good piece at a time/’ If you’ll believe it, that thing grew into a regular custom; the pastor had a boy, a bright enough fellow, who was always ready to scamper over to Daniel Miller’s with the sermon on Saturday nights as soon as the minister could spare it and wait while Daniel Miller went over it. Fact is, as the years went by, he was more willing to do that than any other errand the father could get up, and he and Nettie went

over church accounts and some other accounts together many a Saturday night. But I happen to know that the pastor came to have a queer feeling that he couldn't preach a sermon until Daniel Miller went over it! That might be in part because he discovered that the old man had a way of going over it on his knees, and every sentence he came to that seemed to him ought to do a certain person any good, he would pray, 'Lord, bless that to John Satkins: and so on, you know. Little Nettie, she let that secret out to the boy one night; and the minister came to feel that Daniel Miller was the associate pastor and was praying the sermon into the hearts of the people all the time it was being preached. When a minister really feels that, he preaches carefully, I believe.

"Well, sir, it was a wonderful life; and when it ended, as I tell you it did a little more than a month ago, I never saw anything like the demonstration; and I didn't wonder at it. Twenty-nine years they had elected that man to office, and the Lord had elected him to a much higher office here on earth; his little notes bore a big harvest; and when the Lord called him to his seat in the church triumphant, the church on earth looked around for someone on whom his mantle could fall, and I tell you it seemed for a time impossible to do without him. Why, I moderated the meeting for them when they met to try to fill his place, and they just spent the first half hour in tears and praying! Such lives tell. 'Infirmity,' indeed! God grant us more men like Daniel Miller."

“What became of Nettle and the boy? Did they get their accounts all settled?” It was the first time the intent listener had interrupted the old Doctor’s vivid story. Indeed, it could not be called an interruption now, for the doctor had paused and let his thoughts run back into the tender past. He roused himself with the question and laughed a little.

“How is it, my son?” he asked, looking over toward the writing table. “Have you and Nettie finished the accounts, or are they open yet?”

“We mean to keep them open, sir, until we join the ‘church triumphant.’ The young man answered quickly, albeit his voice was husky, and he brushed his hand hastily over dim eyes. Then he turned to the guest.

“My father has given you a true picture of my father-in-law’s fruitful life; as good a picture as can be drawn on the moment; but it is as he says, no one can tell the story in its fullness. I think we shall have a wonderful account of it someday.”

There was silence in the pleasant room for a few moments. Then the guest turned to Doctor Mentor. “Thank you,” he said brightly, “thank you very much; they say that ‘a word to the wise is sufficient,’” and he stammered as he tried to speak; then he arose to go.

“Father,” said the son, returning from seeing the guest to the door and stopping for a moment before his father, “do you think Frank Horton is in danger of becoming deaf? Or is

it because he stammers, or just what is the hidden purpose of the story?”

“Well,” said the doctor, “I told him that story because he is like Moses, ‘slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ I think he caught the lesson and will put it into practice. I am told that he is a very bright, earnest Christian, but that he broods over his infirmity and is very sad; you can see it in his countenance. There is a niche for him, just where, perhaps, the infirmity will tell for God’s glory. Look at your father-in-law. I tell you there is a defect in most lives, an ‘infirmity’ of some sort that grace must supplement. It is not for us to fold our hands and say; ‘What a pity!’ but to help find the niche where the marble fits. Mr. Horton is like Daniel Miller. He could not be a good Sunday school teacher, or elder, or minister, but he can do something.”

*The End*



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