a community called...

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THE FATAL CHOICE.

BY REV. R. H. HOWARD.

MANY years ago an interesting work of grace was in progress at a certain school near Pisgah, Central Kentucky. Several of the students had been converted. These organized and conducted a prayer-meeting of their own. Among those who were accustomed to attend this prayer-meeting was a certain promising young man who subsequently became justly celebrated as an orator throughout our country, and especially throughout the West, by the name of Thomas F. Marshall. He was now deeply impressed; convicted as never before of sin and of his need
of a Saviour. But Marshall was ambitious, and he had long ere this deliberately decided that fame as an orator should be his one grand object of pursuit in life. In making choice of a profession, therefore, he had very naturally decided upon that which in his judgment would best enable him to shine and obtain his coveted celebrity as an orator. And as, meantime, the most famous orators of the nation at that day were to be found, not in the pulpit, but in the forum or on the hustings, he had decided that not preaching, but politics or law, or both, should be the object of his professional pursuit. But now these unwelcome religious thoughts and convictions, crowding in upon his mind, were seriously disturbing his preconceived and long cherished plans. He seemed to have confidently anticipated that in case he should be converted he would have to preach. And could he consent to become simply a humble Presbyterian minister? to bring all his ambitions for oratoric fame and sacrifice them on the altar of duty? This was the question.
A severe conflict was now going on in this young man's breast in regard to the same, and it was doubtful in the minds of his anxious associates and friends what the issue of the struggle would be. While still in this dubious, undecided frame of mind, he was drawn one evening to attend one of the aforesaid student prayer-services. The meeting was an unusually warm and earnest one. The interests of eternity were felt to be trembling in the balance. The young men were all kneeling, Marshall with the rest. One of them was leading in prayer. The Spirit of God was mightily poured out and the young student prayed with uncommon unction, fervor and power, and was led withal to intercede with special urgency for Marshall; that he might have grace to decide then and there at once to yield his heart to Christ. Marshall sprang to his feet and fled from the room. On being asked afterward why he did this he said that he felt that if he remained in that room until that prayer was concluded he should have to decide for relig-
ion and to abandon all his projects for fame; and to tell the truth he was not yet fully decided to do that. And so the great question was settled. The young man's choice was made, his decision was fixed, the die was cast, the hour had struck, the book of fate was forever closed and sealed. He had deliberately sacrificed his religious convictions—and together with these, also, his earthly peace and his immortal well-being—on the altar of a paltry, worldly ambition; at the shrine of fame.

At the age of thirty he entered upon professional and public life; at forty he had already become celebrated both as an orator and as a drunkard. To a friend at this time he stated that he supposed that he enjoyed the enviable, or rather the unenviable, in fact the detestable, reputation all over the country, from Boston to New Orleans, of being one of the worst of sots, with one foot in the grave and with an understanding almost totally overthrown.

As a specimen of his rhetorical power, and

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withal by way of indicating the nature of that experience for which he thus turned away from "the sweet comfort and peace" of the sincere and earnest believer, I quote what he says of the drunkard's appetite. He characterizes this as "the hot, feverish thirst; the horrible yearning after the distillations from the alembic of hell, which cannot but scorch the throat and consume the vitals of the confirmed drunkard, as it were, with fires kindled for eternity."

Not long previous to his miserable death (and if I remember correctly he died a pauper and was buried in the potter's field, an object at once of pity and of general detestation), Mr. Marshall confessed to an old friend—the Rev. Lewis W. Green. D.D., a celebrated Presbyterian clergyman, who had been a lifelong and intimate acquaintance of Marshall's, and to whose detailed and eloquent account of the religious crisis above described the writer is indebted for the facts herein set forth—that he understood only too well that there was neither hope nor mercy for him;
that he was a doomed man; and that he was only waiting for the event of death to enter upon the career of the eternally lost.

To another writer I am indebted for the following remarkable testimony from the lips of Marshall, setting forth, in the most glowing and impressive terms, his awful dread of that appalling appetite of which, nevertheless, he was destined finally to fall a wretched and hopeless victim. Says this writer: "The latter part of the life of Thomas F. Marshall, the great Kentucky orator, was a continued struggle against the power of strong drink. But the drink habit had been so long indulged that it was too much for him, and finally overcame him. He once said, 'I sought relief, I took the pledge, and have not wanted to drink since. I would not have the appetite return—I would not now drink again—not if this earth were one entire chrysolite, set all over with the richest gems of Golconda; not if the city of New York, with all the wealth and magnificence it may acquire for half a century to come, not if all this
wealth were placed at my feet; by my honor and by my soul, I would not have that appet­
tite return!’ These words were doubtless honest words, yet the last utterance this great man made was, ‘This is the end. Tom Marsh­
shall is dying, dying upon a borrowed bed, under a borrowed sheet, in a house built by charity, and without a decent suit of clothes in which to be buried.’”

Thus, after having sinned and suffered, and having been hopefully recovered, and having delivered exceptionally eloquent and brilliant temperance addresses all over the country, Thomas F. Marshall fell, and died at last a miserable, hopeless death.

This instance of a fatal choice, made in an eminently critical moment, is by no means a solitary one. Though unaccompanied by the striking and tragical features of the case just given—a case all the more memorable because historic—men are yet continually reaching like crises in their lives, where, touching the matter of some important duty, and particu­larly the all-important duty of religion, the
choice that is made, and the decision formed, become final and decisive; the turning point of life for good or ill, for weal or woe. It is henceforth to be either life or death, heaven or hell, as the case may be. Alas! for the man whose choice thus made, as in the case of poor Marshall, proves to be as fatal, as final. What will a little transient fame amount to under the circumstances? Only as the small dust of the balance. Yea, for that matter, what though one might succeed in gaining the whole world, what yet shall it profit a man if, meantime, he shall lose his own soul? or as Luke has it, lose himself. What think ye, would, at the test hour, have been Thomas F. Marshall’s answer to this question?

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