

Reincarnation.

BY STANLEY EDWARDS JOHNSON.



NE would never have suspected Jerry Carleton of being a philosopher, if one had chanced to meet him at work on his stony farm among the New Hampshire hills. His wide-brimmed straw hat hid his domelike head from view, and, to a casual observer, his working clothes and unkempt beard would have bespoken the yeoman of the glebe.

And yet "Uncle" Jerry was a man born out of time and out of place. Fate had given him the qualities which make a scholar, but had limited his opportunities to the lonely farm where for forty years he had lived with Hannah Perkins, his childless wife, at the time when the present chapter of his history begins.

"Uncle" Jerry's only opportunity for "book larnin'" had been the district school. Educators are accustomed to say, in these days of liberal culture, that no boy or girl who truly desires a university training will be denied it. This may be true, but it was certainly not the case when Jerry Carleton was a boy. It was hard to wrest a living for a family of eleven children from a rocky hillside farm in New England. Uncle Jerry numbered one in such a family. When he was born the world spelled the word "toil" to him in large letters,—and it never spelled any other. Uncle Jerry's hard hands and grizzled face showed that he had mastered its lesson.

Yet from his earliest days he struggled with the problem of existence—not the mere existence of bread and butter, but the knotty equation which God seems to have set before mankind, and which centuries of thought have brought no nearer a solution. With it this New England peasant grappled hard. He was kindly, and his researches mellowed him from year to year,—as all genuine research in philosophy molds the mind into

beautiful perfection of character. There were always plenty to eat and plenty to wear in his home, but all the rest went into books. Uncle Jerry knew Plato and Socrates. He thoroughly understood the Stoics and the Peripatetics. He was versed in Huxley, Spencer, and Darwin, and he had plumbed the deep bottom of the German school. For when the harvests were over and the winter plowing had been done, he did not spend his time in the village store. As a bear hibernates on his nest of leaves, in the depths of his cave, Uncle Jerry for two decades had passed the winter buried in an atmosphere of lofty thought.

When he was old, and his mind was past its prime, he was ready for more fanciful thinking, and then his misfortunes began. The majority of people are wont to look with commiseration on those who become enmeshed in the esoteric philosophy of the Theosophists. Jerry Carleton came to this from Swedenborg, which had already worn several pounds of flesh from the bones of his poor wife, Hannah. But when the teachings of Madame Blavatsky and Mrs. Besant came into that lonely New England household, Hannah Carleton's cup filled and ran over. Now Uncle Jerry—like all philosophers—was pleased to discuss his theories vocally, and for many winters he had rehearsed his ideas to Hannah as she sat silently, in the ingle nook, with her knitting. She had stood it well. She herself never had any opinions, and consequently she never said a word. But when the shadow of the Theosophic specter crossed her threshold she began to quake.

“Yer see, Hannah,” her husband began one evening, “the hull idee rests on the proposition that God in ther beginnin’ created a certain number o’ souls; an’ in course o’ time, ef they behave therselves, they’ll all be promoted to the highest estate. *But* ef they don’t behave, why, then they’ll be debased and reincarnated inter an’mals sech ez pigs, an’ hosses, cows—an’ mebbe hens! Now the more I look inter this idee, the more I’m impressed with the possibility of its truth. I’ve be’n kinder lookin’ inter ther faces of some of my stock, an’ I begin ter see signs of the fólkses who has died here’bouts during the past few years. Some of ’em I never took a likin’ ter!—and ef it’s so I ain’t a-goin’ ter hev ’em ’round.”

One of the things which Uncle Jerry prided himself on was his "stock," — a generic term for all the live things on the farm. Hannah knew that he had been extravagant in selecting fine breeds, and she furthermore knew that if he took a dislike to them, he would not have them about. That would mean a heavy loss, for no one in the region would be willing to pay him what they were worth.

Thus every night when her husband sat down to ruminatè over his books, or would settle back in his chair, deeply thinking, she was in a deadly fear lest his new theory should assert itself in action.

It was not long before she found that her anxiety was well grounded. One evening, after a long silence, the old man suddenly burst into conversation.

"You remember Susan Ricker, don't yer, Hannah? Let's see, she died three years ago, come January. She wuz a pizen-minded critter, an' ef I ever hated a human bein' she wuz the one. Now, I've be'n a-lookin' it up, and I find that my brindle heifer wuz born the night she died. She's alluz be'n ez contr'y ez a woman, an' I've pretty near come ter ther conclusion that I'll not hev her about my farm. Why, I cudn't enjoy a moment ef I supposed that Susan Ricker hed be'n reincarnated, and wuz a-livin' on my fodder, arter all she'd done ter us. Ef I see many more signs sech ez I surmise I seen, I'll git rid o' her ef I hev ter give 'er away."

The animal under consideration was an excellent cow. She was in her prime, and gave good milk and in large quantity. To lose her would make a large difference in the output of the butter the farm produced. This was the only money that Hannah Carleton could call her own. If the cow was lost there would be so much less. She was also a full-blooded animal, and her value was much above that of ordinary cattle. But if she was to be sold at this season, she would hardly bring half her value. The next few days were full of foreboding to Hannah, and as it happened, not without reason. A few evenings later Uncle Jerry entered upon another disquisition on this particular animal.

"You remember, Hannah," he began, "how Susan Ricker used ter toss that ole head o' hers? Wall, ez sure ez I'm a-sittin'

here, that brindle heifer o' mine has just the same toss o' her head! But that ain't all. She don't seem ter be sat'sfied with anythin' I give her. She jest looks at me, and I kin see ez true ez any'thin' that sassy smirk o' Susan Ricker. I've made up my mind that I'll not hev her on this place another day. I've tol' Lem Nutter that he can hev her at almost any price, an' he's a-comin' ter-morrer, an' I jest guess she'll not spend another night on this place."

And such proved to be the case. A bargain was made the next day, and the happy purchaser bragged over his acquisition the same evening down in the village store.

"Kinder seems ter me," he said, "thet Uncle Jerry Carleton's losin' his senses. I've alluz 'brieved so much readin' would do him up. Wall, he sold me his three-year-old brindle heifer for thirty-five dollars, ter-day, an' she would be cheap at twice the sum. Why, she tuk one o' ther premiums at the county fair las' fall, an' I wudn't swop her for any cow I know in this town."

Hannah Carleton saw many little things that she had intended to purchase for her home vanish when her favorite cow departed that afternoon. But she said nothing, and went about her duties with a grave face. Uncle Jerry expressed his great relief over his bargain.

"I'd a-killed her myself, only I wuz afraid she'd be reincarnated inter something better, for I must own thet she wuz a-doin' mighty good work; and yer know thet if a soul begins ter improve, she's bound ter be promoted the nex' time she dies."

The stock on Jerry's farm underwent a close scrutiny that winter, and a few weeks later he had formed some severe conclusions from their conduct. These he voiced in his after-supper disquisitions to his wife.

"Yer know, Hannah," he began one evening, "thet when a pusson is real hoggish, he nat'rally becomes a hog when he dies. Wall, you remember Hi Andrews, who died in ther fall? He wuz one o' the meanest men this town ever hed. Folkses sed he wuz too mean ter draw breath, an' so he died. He robbed all o' his rel'tives an' cheated ev'rybody when he knew he cudn't be found out. Wall, I've noticed a marked resemblance between our pig and Hi Andrews, an' I'm cert'nly averse ter eatin' sausages

made o' him. But I'm sure I don't want ter hev him killed, for if he should appear on earth again, he wud be a curse to any place where he happened ter land. He might become a German or a Chineese, or anythin'; but I think too much o' ther human species ter want ter perpetuate him. I've made up my mind ter let that pig live jest ez long ez he wants ter. It may be kinder hard not ter hev any fresh pork, or sausages an' ham, but I'd a good sight rather go without than feed on such a blamed ole skin-flint!"

Thus did Hannah see vanish one of her most cherished pleasures, that of hog-killing time, when there was a taste of fresh meat, — quite a rarity in her household. She spent her next week in fear and trembling, wondering where her husband's strange hobby would land him next. As it happened, he had a mare of which he was very fond. She was an excellent piece of horse flesh, and was of good Hambletonian stock. She was the only horse on the place, and one, at least, was indispensable. She became the next victim of Uncle Jerry's Theosophic philosophy, and her undoing came about as follows.

"I've never gotten over the sad end of Mary Louise Hastings," observed Uncle Jerry. Hannah prepared for the worst. "I know, of course, that she went wrong, and I know that she'll hev ter be degraded inter some an'mal; but I hev a strong feelin' in her favor, and, livin' or dead, I'd alluz do her a kindness. Now our mare, Bessie, is the exact image of Mary Louise. She hez them same innercent eyes, and she's jest as docile an' trac'ble ez she wuz. Then when she's harnessed up she's for all the world Mary Louise all over again. Now ef I kin be o' any use in helpin' the poor girl along, I'm a-goin' ter do it. So I've concluded I'll shoot Bessie, and release Mary Louise for somethin' higher."

Hannah groaned within herself. Years of experience with her kindly but philosophic husband had taught her that resistance was of no avail. Four winters before she had been taught the philosophy of non-resistance, and by dint of hard experience she knew it was useless to oppose. She had hard work to keep back the tears, for she saw that property worth, at least, two hundred dollars, was doomed, and well she knew their slender resources.

She suggested that a trade might be made, but Uncle Jerry vowed he would give Bessie into no man's hands; and then, besides, it was his duty to release the soul of Mary Louise.

The farm had now lost a valuable cow and a horse, and the household was to be denied its share of fresh pork. Mrs. Carleton was at her wits' end. Vainly she tried to think of some means by which she might win away her husband from this destructive "fad" of Theosophy. She was a good Christian woman, and was a regular attendant at the village church. She knew of no new philosophy which she could substitute for that which was ruining her husband. She at last decided to consult her clergyman.

"Your husband is, indeed, sadly misled," the good man said; "and while I cannot but admire his willingness to make these sacrifices, I can readily see that he is making a mistake which is costing him dear. I really can see no way out of it, and he seems to have exhausted the whole realm of philosophy. But I'll think this matter over, and if I can, I'll gladly help you. Come to me in a few days."

In the meantime Hannah's husband had been making new discoveries. He had a yoke of oxen which had taken the first prize at the county fair for two years running. It would certainly be a difficult matter to imagine what he could discover about these innocent beasts to lead him to part with them. But, as we have discovered, virtues and vices counted for little in the midst of his vagaries.

That evening he began again on the dreaded subject. "I've discovered that them Holcomb twins, who died at ther poor farm six winters ago, hev be'n reincarnated inter my yoke o' red oxen. Yer see thet them oxen is matched ter a day, and it is a fac', Hannah, thet they's born the very day those two ole fellers died. You'll prob'ly recall thet it was considered quite a coincidence thet they died the same day. Wall, thet's all explained now, fer yer see they lived sech a lazy life thet it was necessary ter de-grade 'em. Now ther want no use in them two men ever bein' poor. They hed money ter start with; but they simply *wudn't work*. They wuz for all the world like 'dumb, driven cattle.' When they wuz drove, they would do a little job to earn a meal. Now I never hed anythin' special against 'em, only I shall never

tek any comfort with 'em around. 'I'm mighty sure that *I* don't want ter feel that I'm drivin' them Holcomb twins. So I'm jest a-goin' ter tek what I kin git for 'em, and they'll be put up ter auction in a few days. I know it is hardly a good time ter sell 'em, but I shall hev ter do it. I should never hev any peace if I felt I hed them two ole men hitched up in my barn."

Before the end of the week the "twins" were knocked down for about half their value.

But the good clergyman was about to come to the rescue. He was a kind man, and was really concerned when any of his flock were in trouble. He had thought of many things, but as there seemed to be no new fields of philosophy for Uncle Jerry to explore, he had a difficult task. One evening, as he was pondering over this matter, he had an inspiration. He did not wait for Mrs. Carleton to come to him, but, in the same minute the idea was born, started for her home.

He knew that Jerry Carleton was well versed in all philosophies. Why not engage him to give a course of weekly lectures during the winter? He believed he was safe in offering him ten dollars for each evening. At all events he would make the attempt, and perhaps this would divert the mind so bent on the doctrines of Madame Blavatsky. He unfolded his plan, and it was agreed that he should make the proposition to Uncle Jerry. He was fortunate in meeting the old man in the village the next day. That night Hannah noticed the delight in her husband's face.

"Wall, Hannah, I've never expected to become famous; but it seems that some folkses think I know somethin', arter all. Now what do yer think that our minister hez a-be'n a-proposin'? Wall, I'll tell yer. Ho wants me ter delivor ten lectures on Greek philosophy. Now, I studied that pretty clost for two winters, and even ef it is ten years ago, I kin remember all the sayin's of them ole fellers as well as ef it wuz only yisterday. I tol' the dominie that I wuz no great speaker, but I'd guess I'd like ter try,—an' I'm a-goin' ter. That money'll do us a sight o' good, for we've hed ter suffer a good deal fer the sake of ther truth this winter. But I kinder guess we've rooted out all the reincarnation we hev on this farm."

In this way the flock of poultry and the rest of the cows on the Carleton farm were saved. Uncle Jerry spent his evenings in the labored effort of writing his lectures. They proved a great success, and there is one New England town where there is an unusual knowledge of the Greek philosophers. When another winter comes around Uncle Jerry is going to take up another topic, and the snows of many more will fall before he once more reaches the modern doctrine of Theosophy.

