Only a Box.

Only a box, secure and strong,
Rough and wooden and six feet long,
Lying here in the drizzling rain.

Only an owner, businessman,
Cold and dead and stony-eyed;
Little to him if the train be late,
Nothing has he to do but wait.

Only an open grave somewhere,
Ready to close when he gets there;
Turfs and grasses and flowers sweet,
Ready to press him 'neath their feet.

Only a band of friends at home,
Waiting to see the traveler come;
Naught he will tell of distant lands,
He cannot even press their hands.

He has no stories weird and bright,
He has no gifts for a child's delight;
He did not come with anything,
He had not even himself to bring.

Yet they will softly him await,
And he will move about in state;
They will give him what he appears
Narrow and dark and tender tears.

Only a box, secure and strong,
Rough and wooden and six feet long;
Angels guide that soulless breast
Into a long and peaceful rest!

—*Will Carleton in the Toledo Commercial.*

THE DOSTERS.

A Romance of Georgian Life

They had a long talk. Esther Mr. Bullington dwelt at great length upon the awful consequences of bringing into that neighborhood, and into school, which doubtless forbade him to particularize, such doctrines as sprinkling, falling from grace, and in all dreadful human probability infant baptism. The truth of the whole business, on Mr. Bullington's opinion, was that such as that ought to come as nigh as anything in this whole world could come to make the deceased, to whom respectful, affectionate allusion had just been made, turn over in his coffin if he could do nothing else. At length he ended, and after taking the promised gound, bade his hostess a mournful adieu, and moved away as solemnly as he had come.

Mrs. Joyner, although much more cultivated than her pastor, and less narrowed in opinions, yet reverenced him much; doubtless the more for the sake of the affectionate relations that had existed between him and her late husband. Therefore she was much affected by his words, and when Ellen concerned she said:

"Ellen, I know, of course, that I have no right to your confidence or any influence upon you, although you are my own and only daughter, and I used to have both. I forgot to ask you how is Sister Doster."

"She's well, ma," answered Ellen, lowly, holding her bonnet strings and looking as if she feared her mother was losing her reason.

"Ah! glad to hear it; but if you have made up your mind to marry that Methodist preacher, I think you owe it to me and to the memory of your father to say nothing of poor dear old Brother Bullington, who, if anthing, is worse off about it than I've been until now—I think you owe it to us all to have some sort of understanding that you are not to be interfered with in your religion; that is, if you haven's already determined in your own mind to give it up.

Ellen removed her bonnet at leisure; readjusted the combs in her hair; then, sitting down, answered:

"Ma, Henry Doster has never mentioned Methodism to me a single time that I can remember. Mr. Bullington has been here, I see. I thought they were his horse's tracks I noticed at the gate. And he has set you more against Henry. Did he have to say anything about Tom?"

"Some; not very much."

"What did he say, ma?"

"He only said—that is, he only intimated that—perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad if Tom——. What are you laughing at, Ellen?"

"Beg pardon, ma; but, seeing what you were going to say, I was comparing it with what Harriet told me of her mother saying, no longer ago than yesterday, about Henry Doster, and of her preference for him over Tom. It is right curious. You agreed with Mr. Bullington; now didn's you ma?"

"Well, if you must know, I did; and I wish in my heart, if you must have a Doster, that it was Tom, and that to-morrow."

"Well, ma," replied the daughter, after a little sigh, "I've heard you say many and many a time that you married the man of your own choice, although he was not that of your parents, and that you never had cause to repent of it, and now you talk to me as if I had no right to govern myself according to my own feelings. Yet, ma, you know that if Tom Doster and I, no further back than six months ago, had taken a fancy for each other, you would have been against it, and so would Mrs. May have been as between Henry Doster and Harriet, whom now she declares she would receive as a son-in-law readily—yes, thankfully. What are two poor, inexperienced girls to do in such a case?"

Ellen, notwithstanding her inexperience, looked at her mother as if she had the argument on her. But the latter confidently responded, "No, because neither of us had ever had a thought of your marrying Dosters of any kind. Martha May knows not what she's talking about when she talks that way; but she's no strong Baptist any way and never was, and she's carried away with what people talk about what a great orister that Henry Doster is, and going to be a bishop or some great somebody, when there's Tom Doster joining land right next to her, and industriousest young man in this whole section of country, and would make that plantation look another sort to what it's been brought, and he's always been a good Baptist, and he's as good-looking any day as Henry Doster, and to my fancy better. And then what is he but a son of me when my only daughter is following a Methodist preacher wherever they've a mind to send him when people get tired of him in one place and another, and my only son no more managing than Will May, and no little company or comfort to his mother otherwise? But I suppose I'll have to trust that the good Lord will take care of me somehow in my old age."

Then she wept freely, though without bitterness.

"Ma," said Ellen, in manner as conciliatory as her affectionate spirit could employ, "I am glad you spoke to me so freely and candidly. I have never asked Henry Doster about what are to be my religious privileges, nor as to the relations I am to be allowed to hold with you, the more dear to me because you are a widow, and because brother is not as considerate of you as he ought to be. He, as you well know, would no more have approve Tom Doster's, than he now approves Henry's suit of me, although he would have swapped me to anybody who could have given to him Harriet in exchange. Let that go. But I tell you now, and you may tell Mr. Bullington if you chose, that I have no idea, at least for the present, of quitting yours and my father's church. Somehow, ma, my parents have entered to become the dearer, if possible, to my heart since—since I have been indulging another feeling." She blushed deeply, and covered her face. "Of course," she faltering, she continued, "nobody can foresee what changes are to come over their lives; but now my expectation is to continue a Baptist, praying always to have a good one as pa was and as you are. Can you be satisfied with that, ma?"

"I'll have to be, I suppose."

"Still you'd feel safer if it was Tom," and she playfully patted her mother's cheek.

Removing the hand, yet not rudely, "You know I cannot tell a falsehood, Ellen."

"Ah me!" sighed the sweet girl, and went up to her chamber.

CHAPTER X.

Mr. Bullington's call was on a Wednesday. On the following Friday evening our two girls went in the Joyner carriage to spend the rest of the week at the Ingrams'. Tom had business in town on the following day, and as that was the stated Conference Saturday for Mr. Bullington's congregation in town, it occurred to Tom to do his pastor a little favor. So riding up to his gate toward sunset, he called him out, and said:

"Brother Bullington, I have to go to town early in the morning on some business, and knowing your horse was busy helping to gather in hay, I thought I'd propose to take you in my gig. It will suit you and you can make it convenient to start immediately after breakfast."

"Why, Brother——why, yes, my son," he answered. "It suits me exact. I am mighty pushed to git in my wheat before the dark nights gives out. I'll be over a-pass ma's time you git your breakfast, and——"

"Oh, no, I reckon's how you take all the trouble. I'll ride over here."

"All right, Tommy. Night, and tell ma the news."

"Sorry I can't stay, Brother Bullington; we spoke now that I know of. I am glad I can accommodate you. Good-evening."

"Reckin, Tommy."

Another Bullington thought that he felt a little better; for this was the first visit since the beginning of the rumors concerning him and Harriet May. Next morning he had just risen from an early breakfast,

"My! my! You are bright and early this mornin'," was his salutation, as he advanced to meet him.

Considering his prominence as a public man, Mr. Bullington had to a degree remarkable, even in his profession, a faculty of attention, at times of intense listening. Serious, indeed saturnine, in disposition, in the presence of one or more listeners he had a habit of compressing his lips, swelling his jaws, and contracting his brows while regarding with solemnest attention a speaker, whether the latter's remarks were meant to be taken as earnest or sportive. Afterward he would reflect most respectfully, even severely, before giving the answer which subsequent silence might lead him to believe was expected. Joy or grief seemed to make no separate impression upon that countenance except that the former perhaps was rather more agonizing. He never wept, at least with his eyes, except on occasions of much hilarity, when, as it appeared, he was suffering quite remorse for having been momentarily seduced from his habitually solemn port by manifestations of interest in the frivolities of such a wicked world. On such occasions the corners of his mouth would let down, his lower lip shrink and hide behind its superior, all making it appear that in him, among the various emotions of the human heart, that excited by humor was the most sorrowful.

Tom was in high spirits. Any healthy young man with no uncommon load upon his conscience ought to have been light of heart driving along the road on such a morning in the fall of the year, the sun, the air, the forest leaves, seeming as if they had been created purposely to gladden mankind. Tom rattled on gayly on this theme and on that. He believed that he said some good things, some excellent things, in fact, for one used to more serious work than merely making merry. Some of them must have been extremely funny, judged by by the exorciating grief of his companion. When they had gotten as far as what town people called the Two mile Branch, and the horse had taken a drink and set out again, Tom said;

"Brother Bullington, I want you to do me a favor. It won't take much time or trouble. Get up there, Bill."

Mr. Bullington turned, and for a while looked savagely into Tom's face, at length answering, "You ought to know, Tommy, if you don's, that I'll do what lay in my power for you, or any of your people."

"I thought so, or I wouldn't have taken the liberty of asking you. Brother Bullington, I want you to marry me."

"The goodness gracious, Tommy!" in due time came the response. "Why, I'll do it. In course I'll do it. When?"

"I'll let you know before long. I thought you'd do me that favor. The truth is, I wouldn't feel exactly right in giving the wedding-fee I've laid up to anybody else than you, whom ma and I and all of us think so much of."

Mr. Bullington would surely have cried now if he had known how. Concentrating his gaze more and more fiercely upon Tom, he writhed and writhed, as Tom, waving his whip now and then, enlarged upon the pleasure it would be to him always hereafter to remember that his own pastor, and his wife's pastor, and the pastor of his parents, and the pastor of his wife's parents, and the pastor of——. But here they reached the Gateston Hotel. After alighting, Tom turned the horse over to the hostler, and said:

"Let us go into the hotel palor for a little while, Brother Bullington. I want to see a couple of gentlemen there for a few minutes, after which you and I can continue our conversation."

Entering, Mr. Bullington looked in slow, menacing astonishment, first at Mr. Swinger, then at Henry Doster.

"Well met," said the former, rising, taking Mr. Bullington's hand, lifting it up, and shaking it cordially. "How do, Br'er Bull'n't'n? Mornin', Tom. Little 'head 'o time, but better too soon than too late, special on the arrant you come on this mornin'. Take a seat, Br'er Bull'n't'n, and tell me all about yourself and family. Hain't see you, nor to shake hands 'long with you sense that day at the Shoals."

After salutings and seatings all around, Mr. Bullington regarded Mr. Swinger sternly, as if to ward against assault. But the latter soon put him at as much ease as it was possible for him to feel in the company of dangerous heretics, who, plausible without, within were possessed of malignity and subtlety. After declaring over and over again how glad he was to see his brother Bullington, and to notice how well he held his own, and if anything how gladder to be told that Mrs. Bullington and the children were well as common, and after getting from Tom Doster such a promise as there would be no going back on to help Mr. Bullington in getting in his wheat during the dark nights, he said:

"Henry, I don's think I ever told you how bad Br'er Bull'n't'n got me one day at the Shoals. I no doubt Tom heard it."

"Now, now, Br'er Swinger," said Mr. Bullington, "you goin' to tell on your own self that a way?" But they knew that, in spite of such remonstrance, he was quite willing for the story to go on.

"Oh, yes; a good thing's a good thing. Br'er Bull'n't'n, and when they on me, I'm bound to let t'other people git the good of it, even if I can't. Well, you see, Henry, it were a one Sadday evenin', I reck'n it ben about or mighty nigh about, three years ago; ain't it, Br'er Bull'n't'n?"

"Be three year Sadday before the fourt' Sunday o' next mont'."

"That's it. You see he ain't forgot. Well, sir, after preachin' that mornin' to about a handful o' people at our poor little Hopewell mestin'-house t'other side of Iggeschee, as I rid by the stow at the Shoals on my way back home, I see Br'er Bull'n't'n and a whole lot o' men thar in the pezaer, and I thought I'd 'light and stop and howdy, and swap a few words with 'em all; for Br'er Bull'n't'n know I always liked him, if he is sech a rambunctious Babtis'. Him nor none of 'em notice me till they see me comin' up the pezaer steps, because for why at that very minute he were firin' away at a ter'ble rate agin we Meth'dises, and his words, jes as I come up, was to the effect that if John the Herbinger had ben a Meth'dis', the Scriptur' would 'a named him that stid o' John the Babtis'; and he up, he did, and as he howdied along with me he say, "And here's Br'er Swinger, as good a man as they're got, and he can't deny my words." Well, sir, you better believe I. Is were a Babtis' crowd, as you know they're awful strong, up and down, on both sides o' the Igeechee. Yit, I thought, never do not take up the old man's channelge, though I weren't in what a body might call fightin' fix, a not a expectin' no sech. And then it were somehows, for the oniest time in my life, my ideas, and my thoughts, and my argyments, and my words, and my speeches, everything I had, they all got jumbled together, and they got that piled up on top o' one 'nother that I jes had to stop, and to set down, and see if I couldn't untangle 'em and gather 'em in hand. And then, right thar, at the very minute I begin to think I see daylight, 'Br'er Swinger!'—you might a heere him a mile away—he bawled out, he did, and he hollered, and say, 'Ah, Br'er Swinger, is were John the Babtis'. No Meth dis', in them days—leastways o' them names. No wonder you speechless; but if you was able to talk, and could stand up and talk all day long, I'd jes take a cheer and sat down calm, and 'casion'ly fling in a primmary few remarks, and ask you to p'int out the chapter and the verses where they tells about the Meth'dises in the Good Book.' And then he shook his big sides, and the t'others they all broke out lake a gener'l haw-haw. Well, sir, bless your soul! All of a suddent I got so mad that for jes about a second I'd a skin't feel like heatin' off and letin' old Br'er Bull'n't'n have it right in the mouth, for flingin' such a laugh on me, engaged for it as I were. But I knew such ce'tnt won't begin to do, because I know Br'er Bull'n't'n have big a fist as me, and it wouldn's do nohow."

Herself broke into heartiest laughter except Mr. Bullington, who, what time he was not wiping his overflowing eyes, sat heaving his vast frame and glaring upon the narrator with a ferocity whose wretchedness was appalling.

"And so finall," resumed the historian of Ogeechee border warfare, "what you reck'n I done? Why, sir, I whisled to, I did, and I thought I'd my laughin' agreed too. But you all know what sort o' laughin' that is when you know people see you feel more like cryin' than anything else; not so the more I tried to laugh. The more the whole herhoot of 'em laughed more enough; and at last I got my, and go away, and got on my horse, and rambled off from thar."

It looked as if the agony of Mr. Bullington would soon become unendurable; but at this moment the light tread of ladies' feet was heard in in the hall, and presently the landlady of the hotel and Mrs. Ingram entered, followed by Ellen and Harriet. The last two were haunted and haunting.