

LOOK NOT ON THE WINE WHEN IT IS RED!

Beware! oh! beware!
Young stranger, take care,
When it sparkles before thee so brilliant and fair;
And away turn thine eye
To you pure azure sky,
And think of His word who is Sovereign there.
Thought at first it delight thee,
Like a serpent 'twould bite thee,
And sting like an adder! Beware! oh! beware!
If the wine-cup be bright,
'Tis a treacherous knight,
And will lead thee to ruin. Oh! flee from the snare!
—Band of Hope Review.

"A BAND OF THREE."

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"Water Gipsies," Etc.

CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

Yes, he had secured the children's money. He felt the little bag lying heavy against his breast as he returned to where Skeggs was impatiently waiting for him.
"The girl's away," said Skeggs. "I see her cross the road. We hain't a minute to lose. Let's come up at once and get the little 'un."

"We can't," replied Harper. "I ha' jest bin h'up, and the door's locked as firm as possible. We can't get into the room no-how."

"Let's break open the lock," said Skeggs, with an oath.
"You don't want the nippers down on us, man," said Harper. "Why, if you and me went up in broad daylight, and tried to force the lock, why the child 'ud scream and the neighbor's 'ud run up. The whole game 'ud be at an end of we did seech a foolish trick as that."

Skeggs was forced to see the truth of these words. So, rumping his rough head and considerably grumbling, he sat down.
"I 's'pose as yer right," he said; "but the fact is, I must know when I am to leave the kid. There's a new piece to come on the week after Easter. We want to advertise it for Easter Monday, and we want the young 'un in two different 'acts. We must have her at once to train. So when can I have her, Harper? I have the five pounds all tucked away safe in my pocket yere, to give yer the werry moment as you hands me over the kid."

"I dare say," replied Harper. "But I may as well be plain at once, and say as I won't do the job fur no dirty five pounds. I know what you'll say, as I promised as I would yesterday; but since that I ha' bin turning the matter h'over, and I jest won't, and that's flat. I could get you the child this minute if I wished; but it won't be fur that paltry sum. 'Tis a nasty trick, and I don't like it; and I won't do it if I'm not well paid. You say plain as can be as you'll make a fortin out of the little kid. Now, wot I'd like to know is this—why should I help you, Skeggs, to make a fortin?"

"'Twas you first told me of the kid. 'Twas you first put the thought in my head," said Skeggs.

Angel to this place. Her sisters would find her; the police would force him to give up the stolen child. No; Harper must be his friend in the matter. With Harper against him he could do nothing. Well, should he give it up? He could get many another little child whose parents, for a far less sum than five pounds, would allow it to come to him to take its place on the tight-rope, and to perform its child's part in the plays.

Skeggs almost felt inclined to give up Angel, and to look for some other child. He almost resolved; and then again the greatness of the chance he was throwing away came over him. He saw through Angel a glimpse of making both fortune and renown, and he really could not give it up. Had he ever in all his life seen such a pretty, graceful child as little Angel? Had he ever beheld such dancing, such time, such grace? No; he must secure this little child, cost him what it would. At present, even in the very low place where his company acted, they were looked down upon. He had not one actor of any talent on his boards; but, with a little treasure like Angel, how soon would his house fill; how envious would the managers who despised and looked down on him now become. He had a vision of getting some one to write a little play in which Angel should have the principal part, and already he saw in imagination the applause with which the lovely baby creature would be received.

"You're rare and 'ard on a feller," he said at last, raising his head and looking at Harper. "You know as I wants the little kid; but I can get plenty more, plenty more. Wot's yer terms? Ef they're much more nor five pound I can't have nothink to say to 'em."

"My terms are simple enough," said Harper. "and I make no change in 'em. You shall have the child fur what I say—not a penny less—ten pounds down in ready money, and half the profits ever after."

Skeggs uttered a scream of mingled disappointment and fury. Harper smiled.
"You can take a week to think on it," he said. "There's no manner of hurry; and I don't want to have the child kidnapped."

In the end Skeggs did go away, vowing aloud that nothing would induce him to be cheated like that. But Harper knew well that he would yield, and yield quickly. He felt that the ten pounds, and half the profits afterward, were as safe as though he had them already in his possession; and now that Skeggs had gone, he could reckon up the money in the children's canvas bag.

CHAPTER XVII.—THE STOLEN TREASURE.

When Peachy came in, half an hour afterward, she found Angel awake, and much better. Peachy's own stolen pleasure had evicted her spirits, and she and Angel were enjoying a regular game of play when Dulcie returned. Dulcie's day had been fatiguing, and not very successful. Dulcie, during her whole day's weary pilgrimage, had not secured sixpence, and she came in very dispirited in consequence. "I ain't bought wot we want fur to-morrow," she says; "I ain't the money. No one seemed to care to hear me play alone; 'tis us three as makes the money, more particularly little Angel."

"Angel will dance to get money for 'ou, Dulcie," said the little child.
"Ye's, darlin'; and now that you're better I don't care fur nothink else. Only I did feel low when every 'un turned agen me to-day."

"But we can go to France to-morrow, can't we?" asked Peachy.

"Oh! yes, Peach. I'm beginning to see as we three little children really do need our father werry, werry much; and ef we can get to him it 'ud be the best thing as can happen to us. Yes, we'll go to-morrow; only I'm feared I'll have to do wot I don't want ter do, and that is, to take a little of the money out of our bag, to buy the few things as we'll want."

"Well, let's," said Peachy; "there's heaps and heaps in the bag. We really are quite rich little children. You take the bag out sid you, Dulcie, and buy wot you'll want; there'll be plenty left to find our father with."

"I'll go out and buy 'em now," said Dulcie, "fur I think we'd better start quite early in the morning. I'd better lose no more time now, fur I must see old Harper, as well as buy the little bits o' duds; and perhaps Mrs. Martin down stairs 'ud keep our bedding and little table, and the round pot, t'ill we comes back wif father."

"Yes, there's deal to be done," said Peachy. "I'll fetch the bag out. It do seem a pity to touch it, now it's growing so beautiful and heavy. But, there, it can't be helped."

"Here's a rum state of things," she exclaimed. "I can't feel it nowhere. You're taller nor me, Dulcie; you lie down and stretch in yer hand. It must ha' got a great push in, fur I can't feel a sign of it."

"But it couldn't have got fur in," said Dulcie, "fur I laid it in jest near the edge last night."

"She took her sister's place, and felt eagerly all round for the bag, but with the same fruitless result. A candle was brought, and as well as they could they peered into the hole. But neither sight nor feel could bring them back the stolen bag.

"It must be there," said Peachy, vehemently hopeful, in spite of a slight, dull ache in her heart. "I'll get the long broom and poke fur it, Dulcie. It's ha' jest got slipped very far bac. It never played us such a shabby trick afore."

"The long broom was brought, which soon reached the limit of the division under this portion of the floor. But, alas! it came against no hard substance. Nothing impeded its progress round the dirty hole, and it came out empty as it went in.
"Someone ha' come and stole our Lost Father Fund," said Dulcie. She sat up on the floor, the long broom in her hand, and Peachy and Angel gazing at her. Angel's little face expressed nothing but wonder, but Peachy was white as a sheet, and her large black eyes were full of tears.

"Well, my little maid," he said, trying to speak jauntily and to be civil, "it ain't often as you favors old Harper wid a witt. You're not an o'er-eevil little lass, nor o'er-obliging when you ha' wissiters of yer h'own; but there, I ain't the man to bear malice. I wor a bit angered on Sunday; but it ha' passed, it ha' passed, we'll say nothing more about it, and I don't mean to rize the rent on you three, for another little while."

"It is to be doubted whether Dulcie heard a word of this speech. She waited until old Harper had quite finished, then holding out her hand, she said in a quiet voice, "Will you please to give me back h'our money, Mr. Harper, the money as you were reckoning h'up when I knocked at the door."

The directness and absolute fearlessness of these words nearly took old Harper's breath away. He gazed for a moment in almost terror at the child, then raised his hand as if to strike her. "Your baggage!" he said, "wot do you mean?"

"That's h'our little canvas bag a-lying at yer feet," continued Dulcie. "I know h'our little bag quite well, for mother made it her own self—it wor the last piece of work as mother ever did do. Will you please give it back to me, Mr. Harper? You tuk it away to-day when Peachy wor out, and little Angel as' req. The door wor locked, but you found a key as opened it. Yes, I see a key same as h'our key hanging up on that bunch on the wall. Please, Mr. Harper, give me back h'our money."

Old Harper stooped down to pick up the fallen bag. "This is my h'own, my h'own," he gasped. "Ye's rare and impudent. I've a good mind ter kick yer h'out. How dare you say as I stole yer money? This is my h'own. I wor a-counting of it h'up. I'm a werry, werry poor man. Perhaps you'd like to steal it! I think as ye're a werry wicked gal. I'll lock the bag h'up."

He rose from his seat and flung the canvas bag into the cupboard, and putting the key into his pocket, sat down again. Yes, he must brave it out; but he was horribly frightened. He believed either that Dulcie was a witch, or that she had really witnessed the whole theft. He must, however, brave it out. So he said, in as menacing a tone as his shaking old voice could muster, "Ef yer don't want me to strike yer, you'd better get out o' this."

"No, I don't think as you'll strike me," said Dulcie; "you ha' tuk our money, but I don't think even such a werry wicked man 'ud strike a poor orphan gal like me. I ain't a bit afeared, and I want afore I go to say a thing or two 'bout that 'ere little bag. Mr. Harper, I don't think it 'ud make you werry happy, and it means a deal to us little children. I can't force yer to give it back 'gainst yer will, and I can't go to the perlice, fur they would not believe the words of only poor little street children 'gainst yours; but, Mr. Harper, ef you'd give it back ter me I think as it 'ud be better fur yer by-and-by."

"Get away. Get away, or I'll strike yer," repeated Old Harper.

Dulcie did not stir a step; a faint, very faint smile just came round her lips. She continued—

"The reason I think as it 'ud be better for yer by-and-by, is something as mother once telled me. Mother and father (it wor afore I wor born), they wor passing a tall ladder put up against a house; there wor a man on the ladder doing some'ut to the roof, and while father and mother were a-looking on, the man lost his hold on the ladder and fell to the ground. He died in half an hour afterward, and mother, she sat on the ground and held his head on her lap. He didn't know nothink at first, but jest afore the end come, he opened h'up his eyes and looked at mother and said—oh! so werry bitter, mother never forgot the words as long as ever she lived—'I stole a lot o' money, a lot o' money from them as wor poorer nor myself. I can't give it back now and the devil is coming fur me, the devil is coming fur me.' He never spoke another word, and when mother told us that 'ere story, she allers said to keep honest, for she said as not h'all the riches in h'all the world 'ud be worth the sound in that man's voice when he seed the devil coming fur him."

Old Harper sprang to his feet. He caught Dulcie by the shoulder and almost pushed her to the door. "I wonder I ha' patience wid yer," he said, "a-coming and a-talking to me like that. You get away this werry minute. I ha'n't yer bag. I ha'n't never stolen in my life. There! get you gone. Go, I say!"