

Tales and Sketches.

"A HARD LESSON."

"This is your eldest son, I suppose, Mr. Cooper."

"Yes. This is my Tom. He's a man now. Drank off a glass of ale to-day, for the first time in his life. Didn't you, Tom?" and as Mr. Cooper spoke he laughed contentedly, rubbed his hands, and, finally, gave his promising boy a hearty slap on the shoulder by way of commendation.

Eight years had passed since the above conversation was held in the market-place of the old-fashioned county town of B—, and Tom, now a young man of twenty, had made rapid progress in what his father was pleased to call manliness.

It was a bleak evening in February, and the north wind moaned around the corners of the quaint farm-house, which had been occupied by the Coopers for four generations. But, cheerless though it was outside the substantial ivy-covered walls, it was bright enough within them.

Mr. Cooper was sitting before a blazing fire, his slippered feet resting on the highly-polished fender. He was enjoying his customary perusal of the *Times*, and, judging from the smiles which ever and anon crossed his features, and his frequent though inarticulate expression of approval, the leading article was proving most interesting to him.

Mrs. Cooper, a pleasant-faced, gentle-looking lady, with soft rosy cheeks, and glossy dark hair, just streaked with grey, was seated in her low chair, not many yards from her husband. She was evidently not so composed as he was, for every now and then she glanced anxiously at the time piece, and if the wind but shook the window frames, she started, and turned her eyes to the door.

"Don't you think Tom is rather late?" she ventured to say, presently.

"Oh! he's all right, my dear. Don't fidget. Trust him for taking care of Number One;" and Mr. Cooper went on with his reading.

The motherly little woman got up and went to the kitchen, to see if Tom's supper was in readiness. Then she opened the back door and peeped out, only to find that a snow-storm had set in, and that the high wind was madly whirling the white flakes in every direction. She shivered, and sighed, and closing the door, returned to the parlor.

"Our poor boy will be half frozen," she remarked to her husband, as she resumed her seat by the fireside. "Tis snowing fast."

"Snowing, is it?" replied Mr. Cooper, folding his paper and laying it aside. "Trust Tom for getting something hot at 'The Crown' before he starts; and even if he does get half frozen, as you say, he'll soon thaw when he gets in here. You women always make mountains out of mole-hills," he added, with a laugh. "I've been out till midnight in many a worse storm."

"Now, George, don't talk so. I'm sure I don't fidget, unless I've cause."

"Very well, little woman; very well. Only, you see, we cannot agree as to what is a sufficient cause. Suppose my market train's a quarter of an hour late. I fancy you at home here breaking your heart over an imaginary collision."

"But I am really anxious about Tom; he's nearly two hours later than usual, and 'tis such a stormy night."

"He'll be in at 'The Crown' with some of the other farmers."

"That's just what I'm afraid of. I begin to wish that he had been kept from the drink. He's getting too fond of it."

"Tush! What would you have him to be? Not one o' those temperance fellows, that wouldn't drink a glass of good wine for love or money?"

"Better be a temperance man than a drunkard," suggested Mrs. Cooper, with a melancholy shake of her head.

"A drunkard? Why, who ever would dare to say our Tom was a drunkard? He'd be the first Cooper that ever got the title, and I'd not be slow in paying back the man that gave it to him. No, no, wife. Tom's a bit wild, 'tis true; but he's no drunkard, nor ever will be. I was worse than he is when I was his age. That was before you knew me—lucky for me that it was, eh?" and Mr. Cooper tried to dismiss the matter with a cheery laugh.

But Mrs. Cooper was restless and nervous as before, though she kept her fears to herself.

Presently they heard the sound of wheels.

"My word, if he isn't coming at a pace," exclaimed Mr. Cooper, starting to his feet with sudden alacrity, and hastening to the door, at a little distance from which he found Tom's horse, foaming and panting from its frantic gallop.

"Is it all right?" called Mr. Cooper.

There was no answer save the pawing of the excited animal.

"A light, my dear—quick! He can never be asleep at the bottom of the gig. Tom, are you there?"

A weird cry of the north wind was all the reply that came.

In a moment a light was procured, and Mrs. Cooper herself carried it to the gig, though her hand trembled so much that she could scarcely hold it.

"He's not here," said Mr. Cooper, in a tone strangely different from that of five minutes ago. "But keep up your heart, wife," he added kindly as he felt her thin fingers clutching nervously at his coat sleeve.

"Hush! Can't you hear voices from across there?" she said, pointing towards the village, which was close at hand.

They listened, and again the sound of manly voices was borne towards them by the wind. The men were very near the gate, and in a few minutes they could catch the words—"Tis a bad job, I tell 'ee. The missus 'll take it to heart dreadful."

Mr. Cooper felt the little frame quiver.

"Go into the house, my dear, go in and I'll see what's the matter," he said.

But she seemed not to hear his voice, and did not move.

The men were carrying something on a shutter. She could see them now; and, as they drew nearer, she felt her heart sink with a dull, heavy throb.

"What's amiss?" inquired Mr. Cooper, anxiously.

"Tis a bad job, I tell 'ee, sir," replied the man who had uttered a similar expression a few minutes before. "He was drivin' kind o' careless, an' so turned the corner too sharp like, an' got thrown out."

"Is he much hurt?"

"Dunno, sir, for sure. He's not moved or spoke sin' ever we came near him."

Ten more minutes, and Tom's cold form was laid on the sofa in the parlor. Mr. Cooper stood a yard off, his hands over his eyes, and his face sadder and paler than it had been for full forty years. Mrs. Cooper knelt down beside her boy, and tenderly pushing back the hair which had fallen over his pale brow, she kissed him repeatedly.

The icy coldness of his lips chilled her heart's blood, and she burst forth in pitiful tone: "Tom—my son—my darling, speak to me. You are not dead? You cannot, cannot be dead. Call him George! See if you can make him speak."

Presently the doctor came. "Dead, quite dead," he said, after a few minutes' examination of the body. "The back of his head has been thrown violently against a sharp stone, and death must have been instantaneous. Ah! poor lad, I saw him myself but an hour ago in the town. He'd taken too much then, I'm afraid. 'Tis a sad case—a very sad case."

Mr. Cooper groaned: his wife, who was still kneeling on the floor, was silent and motionless. Her stony features appealed to the doctor's compassion, and, laying his hand on her shoulder in a fatherly fashion, he entreated her to rise.

His words had no effect save to call forth an hysterical sob, and, turning to the servant, he ordered a glass of brandy to be brought immediately.

The spirits were speedily procured, and Mrs. Cooper allowed the old doctor to raise her and lead her to a chair. Not until the glass was near her lips did she rouse herself, but the odor of the spirits seemed to recall full consciousness, and with a determined effort, she dashed it away.

"His curse! his murderer! Will I touch it? God forbid!" she exclaimed, as she gazed at the atoms of glass and the spilt liquid at her feet.

The good doctor stood aghast, wondering whether the shock had robbed her of her senses; but one look into her face removed all doubt, and he inwardly assured himself that never before had he seen features so expressive of conscious yet unutterable agony.

It would be hard to describe the gloom which hung over the house that night. Kind-hearted neighbors, filled with pity for her who had been always ready to sympathise with them in their troubles, came in to comfort her, and went away again without having uttered a word; and more than one stalwart farmer left the parlor with dimmed eye and choked voice, after having gazed for a moment on the face of him who had so lately been with them in "The Crown," taking an extra drop "to keep the cold out."

"God comfort you, ma'am. He was a right warm-hearted fellow, was poor Tom; and there's never a one of us but loved him," said one of these young men to the stricken mother as he left the house.

"He was a good son," she replied; and added, mournfully—"We'd never have lost him but for the drink."

"Maybe not," was the hasty answer.

The other sons were telegraphed for; and three days later they, with their parents, stood beside the coffin, taking a last look at their loved one.

"My boys," said Mr. Cooper, with emotion, "you know what helped forward, if it did not actually cause his death."

They nodded assent.

"Your mother pleads that you will make a vow, over his coffin, that you will give it up for ever." His self-control failed him before the last word had escaped his lips, and he fairly sobbed out—"It was my fault; I encouraged him."

Solemn indeed was the vow which was taken by both father and sons in that silent room; and it remains unbroken to this day.

Alas! that so many should wait to feel the sting of the serpent before they cast it forth from their hearts and homes.—*Mina E. Goulding, in the League Journal.*