



"YOU'RE JUST AS BAD, EVERY ONE OF YOU!"

NELLY'S DARK DAYS

By the Author of "Lost in London."

CHAPTER IV.

VIOLETS.

ALL the neighbours said it was a mystery how the Rodneys lived for the next three months, for Rodney was away for days together, only coming home now and then during his sober intervals—but it was no mystery at all. The wondrous kindness which the poor show to the poor was at work for them. Mrs. Rodney needed little food; and Nelly was always welcome to share the stinted meals in any house near at hand. Every day at dusk Bessie came in; and if she had been lucky in selling her flowers or fruit in the streets, she did not fail to bring some small, cheap dainty with her to tempt the sick woman's appetite. So the depth of the winter passed by, and the spring drew near, with its Easter week of holiday and gladness.

It was the day before Good Friday, when Rodney was returning, with lagging steps and a heavy heart, to his wretched home, after an absence of several days. Every nerve in his body was jarring, and every limb ached. He could scarcely climb the narrow and steep staircase; and when he reached his door he was obliged to lean against it, breathing hardly after the exertion. It seemed very silent within—awfully still and silent. He listened for Nelly's chatter, or her mother's cough, which had sounded incessantly in his ears before he had left home; but there was no breath or whisper to be heard. Yet the door yielded readily to his touch, and with faint and weary feet he crossed the threshold to find the room empty.

It was his first impression that it was empty; but, when he looked round again with his dim, red eyes, whose sight was failing, they fell upon one awful occupant of the desolate room. Even that one he could not discern all at once, not till he had crossed the floor, and laid his hand upon the strange object resting upon the old bed—the poor, rough shell of a coffin, which the parish had provided for his wife's burial. She was not in it yet, but lay beyond it—in its shadow; her white, fixed face, very hollow and rigid, at rest upon the pillow; and her wasted hands crossed upon her breast. The neighbours had furnished their best to dress

her for the grave, and a white cap covered her gray hair; while between her hands—on the heart that would beat no more—Bessie had laid a bunch of fresh spring violets.

Rodney sank down on his knees, with his arms stretched over the coffin towards his dead wife. Some of the deep, hard lines had vanished from her face, and an expression of rest and peace had settled upon it, which made her look more like the girl he had loved and married twenty years ago. How happy they had been then! And how truly he had loved her! If any man had told him to what a wretched end he would bring her, he would have asked indignantly: "Am I a dog, that I should do this thing?"

The twilight came on as he knelt there, and for a few minutes the white features looked whiter and more ghastly before the darkness hid them from him. Then the night fell. It seemed more terrible than ever now—this stillness in the room which was not empty. His mind wandered in bewilderment. He must get something to drink, or he should go mad.

There was nothing in the room of any value—he knew that; yet there was one thing which might give him the means of gratifying his quenchless drouth. He knew a man, serving at the counter of one of the nearest spirit-vaults, who had a love for flowers; and there was the bunch of sweet violets withering in the dead hands of his wife. For a minute or two the miserable drunkard's brain grew steady and clear, and he shuddered at the thought of thus robbing the dead; but the better moments passed quickly away. The scent of the flowers brought back to his troubled memory the lanes and hedgerows where he had rambled with her, under the showery and sunny skies of April, to gather violets—so long ago that surely it must have been in some other and happier life, and he must have been another and a far better man.

Still, underneath the surface of these thoughts, his purpose strengthened steadily to exchange the fresh, sweet flowers for one draught of the poison which was destroying him—he knew it—body and soul. But the darkness had grown so dense that he could not, with all the straining of his bedimmed eyes, trace the white outline of the dead face and hands; and his skin crept at the thought of touching, with his hot hand, the deathly chill of the corpse. The flowers were there; but how was he to snatch them away from the frigid grasp which held them without feeling her fingers touch his? But the pangs of his thirst gathered force from minute to minute, until, overpowered by them, he stretched out his feverish and trembling hands across the coffin and laid them upon the dead hands of his wife. The cold struck through him with an icy chill that he would never forget, but he would not now fail in his purpose. He loosed the violets from her fingers, and rushed away from the place, not daring to pause for an instant till he had reached the gin-palace where he could sell them.

Rodney had not left the house many minutes when Bessie Dingle entered it, shading with her hand a candle which she had borrowed from a neighbour. She stepped softly across the room, and looked down with tearful eyes upon her friend's corpse. The hands had been disturbed, and the flowers were gone. Bessie started back for an instant with terror, but guessing instinctively what had happened, and whither the miserable man had gone, she drew her shawl over her head and ran down the street in the direction he had taken. She had to peep into three or four gin-palaces before she found him, lolling against the counter, and slowly draining the last few drops of the dram he had bought. Bessie did not pause in her hurried steps, and she threw herself half across the counter, speaking in clear and eager tones:

"You don't know where those violets come from," she cried. He's taken 'em out of the hands of his poor, dead wife, where I put 'em only this afternoon, because she loved me so, and I thought they'd be buried with her. I think she knows what he's done, I do. Her face is gone sadder—ever so—since I saw it this afternoon; for he's stolen the posy from her, I tell you, and she's lying dead!"

"Dead!" he exclaimed. "Come straight from a dead woman to me!"

"Ay!" said Bessie, "straight. And she's loving him to the very last; and toiling me, when she could hardly speak: 'Take care of him! Take care of him!' And he goes and robs her of the only thing I could give her! That's what you make of a man," she continued, more and more eagerly; "you give him drink till there isn't a brute beast as bad; and he was a kind man to begin with, I can tell you!"

"It's his own fault, my girl," said the man, in a pacifying tone. "He comes here of his own accord. We don't force him to come."

"But you do all you can to 'tice him in," answered Bessie. "If it wasn't standing here so handy, and bright, and pleasant, he wouldn't come in. There's something wrong somewhere, or Mr. Rodney 'ud never be like that, or do such a thing as that, I know. Look at him! And when I was a little girl he jumped into the river after me, and saved my life."

"You're just as bad, every one of you," she cried, turning to the onlookers; "you take the bread out of your children's mouths, and that's as bad as stealing violets from your poor, dead wife. It doesn't do her any real harm; but you starve, and pinch, and cheat little children, and it harms them every day they live. None of you has any call to throw stones at him."

She thrust her way through them, and was leading Rodney to the door, when the man behind the counter called to her to take away the flowers.

"Do you think I'd take 'em from such a place as this? No, no! keep 'em and carry 'em home, and tell everybody you see what your customers will do for drink. I'd sooner cut my fingers off than touch them again."

The courage her agitation had given her was well-nigh spent now, and she was glad to get Rodney out of the place.

"Hush!" she said, "hush! Don't go to say you couldn't help it, and she loving you so to the very last minute of her life. 'If he'd only pray to God to help him,' she said. And then, just before she was going away, she said, 'Bessie, you take care of him and Nelly.' And I'm going to do it, Mr. Rodney. You saved me once, and I'm going to try to save you now, if God'll only help me. It shan't be for want of praying to him, I assure you. Oh, if you'd only give it up now at once, before you get worse and worse!"

"I can't be any worse," moaned the drunkard.

"Not much, may be," said Bessie, frankly. "You went and stole Nelly's doll for drink, and now you've stole the violets. But you might be dead, and that's worse. Perhaps, if you go on as you are, you'll be dead in a very little while."

"I wish I was dead," he groaned.

"Why!" exclaimed Bessie, in a tone of as tonishment. "And then you could never undo the harm you've done to poor little Nelly, that you love so, I know, in spite of all. If you'd only think of Nelly, and think of God you wouldn't get drunk again, I'm sure."

"I never will again, Bessie! I never will again!" he repeated fervently. Bessie drew him aside as he was about to turn into his own room.

"No," she said, "you couldn't bear to stay in there alone all night—it 'ud be too much for you. Mrs. Simpson, as is taking care of Nelly, 'll let you sit by her fire, and I'll go and stay in your house. I'm not afraid at all. She loved us all so—you, and Nelly, and me. We're going to bury her in the morning, and I'd like to sit up with her the last night of all."

Before long, Rodney was seated by his neighbour's fire in a silent and very sorrowful mood, with Nelly leaning against him, her arm round his neck, and her cheek pressed against his. He was quite sober now, and his spirit was filled with bitter grief and a senso of intolerable degradation. He loathed and abhorred himself; cursed his own sin, and the greed of the people who lived upon it. If the owners of these places of temptation could hear the deep, unutterable curses breathed against them, their souls would be ready to die within them for their own sin, and the terrible shame of it.

(To be continued.)