

Tales and Sketches.

THE BURNISH FAMILY.

A PRIZE STORY PUBLISHED BY THE SCOTTISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE.

CHAPTER X.

Oratorical and Diplomatical.

"Noah, when he anchored safe on
The mountain-top, his lofty haven,

Made it next his chief design
To plant and propagate a vine,
Which since has overwhelmed and drowned
Far greater numbers on dry ground
Of wretched mankind, one by one,
Than all the flood before had done."

—Butler.

There was more difficulty than might have been imagined in carrying out Mrs. Burnish's plan of sending Mabel to meet Mr. Boon, her brother. He had named the great tree, just within the Hyde Park entrance, at the north side of the gardens. On the seat under that tree looking on to the Park he had promised to be seated, with a newspaper, which he told Mrs. Burnish was to screen him from observation. But it occurred to Mabel and Mrs. Burnish—more to the former than the latter—that there would be great awkwardness in the meeting of two persons who were unknown to each other. It happened, however, that Mabel had an opportunity of identifying the stranger which she had not expected.

A public meeting was held for the formation of a ragged school, in a densely populated neighborhood, not more than a mile from Portland Place. Mr. Felix Burnish had considerable house property in the district in question, and, in conjunction with his brother, had promised some very excellent friends of the destitute poor to be present at their meeting, and give them his aid. Mr. Theophilus, who was the more public man of the two, had promised to preside, if the meeting were convened at an hour of the day when he could be spared from his parliamentary duties. The deputation who had waited on the wealthy brewer were glad to agree to his proviso, and three o'clock in the day was named. A schoolroom was lent for the occasion, and Mrs. Burnish was requested by her husband to go; and, as he said Miss Alterton wanted directing in the right way to benefit the people, he wished her to go also. The younger branches of the family were to be there—the boys because Mr. Veering was to speak, and the little girls because papa wished them to be early initiated into works of benevolence.

At two o'clock, Mrs. Burnish's carriage conveyed herself, Miss Alterton, and Emily and Kate. The boys walked with their tutor. Mr. Burnish was going in his brother's carriage. The day was warm, and the carriage in which the ladies rode was open. They passed through a nest of streets, that looked hot and slimy in the sunshine. Mrs. Burnish held her elegant lilac parasol very low, to shut out a scene she was not prepared for, and kept a vinegarrette to her nose with the air of a martyr.

"Don't be afraid," she said to Mabel. "I have often exposed myself to contagion, often, in my poor efforts to do good, and I have always been preserved."

Mabel had not thought about contagion; she was thinking—strange girl that she was—that the name of Burnish, emblazoned in gold, was the most frequent sight she saw on the only prosperous-looking houses in the district. "Burnish & Co.'s Entire," "Felix Burnish's Best Cordial Gin," ever and anon flashed back the sunshine from the painted frontage of some gaudy house on to the stagnant gutters, where little children wallowed and squabbled, while their fathers and mothers were testing the excellence of the much vaunted Burnish compounds. Mabel could neither close her eyes to the name nor her mind to certain conclusions it forced upon her. At last they came to the court down which the schoolroom was situated. Some policemen were at the corner of the entry and round the schoolroom door, to keep order. Not an easy task, for there was an enormous tavern at the entrance. Just as the ladies alighted, and had to walk a few paces, the Burnish livery was recognized by a free and independent elector, who was making the most of his rights as a Briton to get as drunk as he pleased, and who had often roared himself hoarse for "Burnish and civil and religious liberty." "Hurrah!" shouted this partizan of the family, waving a pot of beer in a skillful curve without spilling it. "Here's Burnish forever, the friend of the poor;" and then he took a big draught, and added with a laugh, "He's the man to our taste; let's have another swig, Joe, of the evangelical mash."

Mrs. Burnish, Miss Alterton, and the children, to use an expressive phrase, 'scurried' past this worthy, and entered the room, which was nearly full, for the meeting was a novelty to that neighborhood. They were skillfully piloted on the platform, and from their seats could at leisure survey the crowd.

There were many anxious intelligent faces among the working classes gathered there, who were bearing the heat and burden of their day of existence bravely and honestly. There were also, on and near the platform, men and women of the more affluent classes, who looked as they felt, all earnestness for the benefit of their fellow creatures—for their life had evidently a purpose far beyond self. Ah! if it were as easy to know how to do good as it is to feel the desire to do it, how much less of noble effort would be wasted. But in this assembly, as in most others—is the house of God itself exempt?—there was evidently the desire to worship wealth. Many in that meeting, whose mental, moral, and spiritual gifts were of the highest order, were unrecognized, nay, even these were not themselves guiltless—they veiled their intellect, and subordinated their opinions, before the wealthy brothers who had condescended to come to the help of the destitution of the district. Great was the applause when they appeared and when Mr. Theophilus took the chair, and proceeded to address the audience. How bland was his smile as he said, "It gave him the greatest pleasure to be there that day, and to aid in the objects the committee had in view; objects, which, without vanity, he might say, had been paramount with him and his family. The interests of education, the interests of truth, and the interests of liberty—(tremendous cheers, in which Mabel heard the voice of the pot of beer orator shout, "Ah, liberty's the thing!")—had been ever dear to his heart. He had had his trials as a public man—the growth of reform, in many important matters, was slow, too slow for his enthusiasm; but then he remarked that all enduring things grew slowly." "No," said a voice, "evil grows quickly and endures." "Turn him out!" was vigorously vociferated. Mr. Theophilus Burnish was rather nervous and annoyed too, that his favorite simile was jostled in the utterance; but he recovered himself, and said, impressively, "The oak grows slowly from the acorn, but it stands a thousand years. (Great cheers.) But I do not intend taking up your time more than by saying, that my brother, who has many ties of interest in this district, and myself, will give our poor aid to any plan that may benefit the rising youth of the country; particularly those—yes, ladies and gentlemen, those who have been, as it were, born to adversity. I rejoice that the present age is alive to their claims; for I should be unworthy of the name I bear, if I did not recognize mind under the tattered garb of—yes! of the child of adversity, as under the silken robes of the aristocracy." The applause was perfectly deafening, with which this sentiment was received.

The chairman then called on the Rev. Mr. Veering, who was flowery and lachrymose. Perhaps, as his flowers were rather faded, he thought they needed freshening up with the dew of a few tears. He expanded the dimensions of the chairman's simile of the acorn and oak. He talked of what they did that day being the acorns dropped by an infant's hand, but generations yet unborn might be refreshed by the shade of the goodly trees that might grow from them. Then he went into an eulogium on the brothers—saying what, if they were not present, he would tell the meeting. How they wiped the tear of sorrow, and lightened the burden of poverty—"the pocket," said that impertinent voice,)—how—but he restrained himself, he would say no more, as the incomparable pair were present. But this he would—he must say—there never was a man who went so to the root of every evil—so thoroughly to the root—as their respected chairman. He went low down in society. Indeed, he resembled the bird, "that singing up to Heaven's gate ascends," and yet, that builds its nest among the clods. Then the reverend orator hoped the descendants of the family would be worthy of their name; and here his voice faltered, and he shed tears! and, somehow, so contagious is emotion of any kind (if there are only sufficient numbers of people, for it mostly depends on that), many ladies wept with him, not knowing, or caring to inquire, good kind souls, why they were so moved.

Mabel had found it difficult to fix her attention on Mr. Veering's speech; it seemed to her to be about the excellence of the Burnish family, rather than the objects contemplated by the meeting; and while she was making vain efforts to find out something practical from Mr. Veering's wilderness of words—hunting as we all have done for the much wanted grains of wheat in the bushel of chaff—she saw near the platform, in a recess at the side, only a few paces from where she sat, a thin man very much bent with sickness or age, with an old coat buttoned up to the chin, and his hat drawn down over his face. He was straining forward and looking very hard past Mabel at Mrs. Burnish. A ray of the sun that streamed from an opposite window fell upon his face, and lighted up two brilliant dark eyes, very deep-set or sunk under cavernous brows. At that moment the people cheered, and Mrs. Burnish, pleased with the popularity of Mr. Veering, who was a great favourite, looked round at Mabel triumphantly, when, noting the direction of her eyes, she also looked at the man for an instant, and then uttered a cry something between a shriek and a sob. Shafton Keen was on the platform, and ran instantly to his aunt, who was with great difficulty removed from the crowded room, Mabel and the children following. Mrs. Burnish was carried into the private apartments of the schoolmistress. A violent burst of tears, and a glass of water soon relieved her. Her first words on regaining composure were a request to go home instantly. She entreated Shafton to return to the meeting, which had in a short half hour become very noisy. It seemed