

Stony Ground.

(W. Rye Leigh, in 'The Methodist Recorder.')

(Continued.)

David Middleton was perplexed. It was a new experience to him. He had never done any 'slumming' and, to tell the truth, he did not want to. It was a frightfully low neighborhood, reeking with drink-shops and of a most unenviable reputation. The city policemen paraded the district in couples and even then were often set upon and ill-used. Besides, he had no desire to carry home some malignant disease to his wife and daughters. He never thought of personal risk, for he was a big man with a big heart and he had welcomed adventures in his youthful days, before love and care had come into his life, but now—well, his duty was to his family.

'And to God,' whispered his friend. 'To God and his little ones!'

'What do they call you, lassie, and where do you live?' he asked, thus admonished.

'They call me Victoria,' answered the child, 'an' I wish they'd been drowned afore they gave me't; an' we live i' Nicholson's court, back of there,' indicating the dark street with a wave of her hand. 'Oh, ye needn't be frightened 'at anybody'll touch ye,' as she saw David's doubtful look, 'ye'll be all correct along o' me.'

David looked his youthful protectress up and down with an amused expression and then asked:

'You're sure your sister is very ill, and really wants to see a parson?'

'As sure as I stand 'ere, if it wor to be t' last word 'at ever I spoke,' replied the child emphatically, but without enthusiasm.

'Well, come along, then; I will spare a few minutes,' said David.

Without a word the child turned up the dark street, and for some minutes David walked by her side in silence. Then, as he felt an unusual nervousness stealing over him, he turned to his companion and asked:—

'What made them call you Victoria?'

'Dunno, unless they was drunk,' was the answer. 'I'll bet they was, 'cos they om-must allus are. T' kids about 'ere call me "Yer majesty" an' "Yer 'ighness." Ye'll see t' palace we live in in a minute. I wish it wa' me 'at was goin' to die, that I do!'

The child's tone was hard and bitter, but her language was not what David Middleton expected from a gutter child, nor was her accent as coarse as that of many whose station in life was much higher, but his only conclusion was that the schoolmaster was abroad even in these vile slums. It did not occur to him that the schoolmaster must be in the child as well as in the school, and that a potentially fine plant may be nurtured in foul soil.

'You will not always think like this,' he said. 'God may mean you to live to do his work.'

The girl shook her head.

'Dunno nothink about no God,' she said. 'Ther's nob'dy bothers wi' that i' this district. This way!'

She turned abruptly to the right and led her companion along a narrow arched passage between the houses. It was pitch dark, and as David stumbled along he nearly fell over some animal that ran across his path.

'Rats!' ejaculated Victoria, and passed on unmoved.

It was a relief when they emerged into an open court whose outlines were made

dimly visible by a solitary gas-lamp which jutted out from the side of one of the houses. Before David had time to more than glance swiftly round, however, his companion pulled his coat.

'Mind where ye're goin'. T' flags is all anyway i' this yard, an' ye must hold on to t' rails goin' down t' steps.'

The child was right. The flags were loose and broken and badly in need of relaying. Here and there great pools of water had formed in their hollows, and the guide's injunction was wise and timely.

David picked his way carefully along until the child stopped at the head of some steps that led down to what was obviously a cellar dwelling. She had reached her home.

'This is t' place,' she snapped, with sardonic humor. 'Old on a bit, there's a bloke comin' up.'

David held on. The child little knew how he was holding on. Holding on with all the strength of his faith to the strong arm of his God, for he felt just then as weak and nervous as a child.

It was a young man who came running up the steps, and at the sight of David he stopped.

'Are you the clergyman?' he asked, and without waiting for an answer he continued: 'The child's very anxious to see you. She's perfectly sensible now and you needn't be afraid of harming her. She'll die about midnight,' he added, lowering his voice to a whisper, for the parish doctor's assistant was a gentleman and he had observed the girl. 'Beastly night, isn't it? Good-bye,' and away went the doctor and David heard him begin to whistle a lively tune as he turned down the passage. His work was finished; David's was to begin.

He followed Victoria down the steps, holding carefully on to the rail as she had instructed him and stood at length in the home which the child had designated 'the place.' What a sight it was that met his gaze.

You who live in comfortable homes, with pleasant rooms and soft carpets and bright lights; who draw your curtains across the windows and your easy chairs up to the cheerful blaze upon the hearth; who tuck your little ones into their warm beds and tread softly lest you disturb their light slumbers—look upon this other home where your brothers and sisters live and look upon it with pity and thankfulness, too, David Middleton did.

As a preacher he was familiar with quotations and one came to his mind which he paraphrased thus: 'But for the grace of God David Middleton might have lived here,' and bad trade and bad debts retired into the background of trifles. God was teaching the teacher. This is what he saw.

A low square room, with a stone floor as uneven and almost as damp as the flagged courtyard above. Bare walls of brick, dirty-white, with an irregular dado of damp extending some four feet from the floor and encircling the room—a dado on which feathery, fungus-like excrescences made a pattern. Above, a ceiling which, as to three-fourths its area, showed nothing but thin laths, whilst the remainder held a thin plaster, itself threatening to drop at any moment.

A stone sink stood beneath the window and a cupboard, evidently home-made and of rough, unfinished boards, leaned unsteadily in one corner. It had never been painted, and its black and greasy condition made David shiver. He suspected that food was

kept within it. A round deal table, almost as dirty as the cupboard, occupied the middle of the room, and for seats there were a three-legged stool and an arm-chair, which was short of an arm and was supported at one corner by an old soap-box—Victoria could have explained for what purpose the broken leg had been used. There was also a bed, which I will describe presently—that was all.

To David Middleton's surprise there was a fairly good fire in the gray and dilapidated grate, and it was by its light rather than by that of the smoking candle that he was enabled to inspect the room and its inmates.

There were three of these—a man and woman and the sick child. The man sat in the chair with his legs stretched out upon the hearth. His bleared eyes and swollen face told their own sad tale of drink and passion. He wore the rough corduroy trousers of the street-laborer, with a short jacket that had once been black and was now green, and thick, heavy boots. On his head was a cap of a kind of velvet corduroy, with ear-protectors tied over the top, and he had a red scarf about his neck. In his mouth was a pipe, the bowl of which was turned downwards, and on David's entrance he merely nodded and said: 'Ow do!' and went on smoking.

David was surprised to find him there, and so was the man's wife.

The latter turned from the fire at the sound of footsteps, and stood revealed in the firelight as a woman of about forty. She was a big, well-made woman, with a hard face, strikingly like Victoria's, but with drink stamped on every feature of it. Her boots were of cloth, but the soles had for the most part little connection with the uppers, and were not much better than sandals. As for her dress, it was that of the women of her class—the class that drinks when it can, and works when it must, and mends—never.

She repelled David more than the man did, and the tone in which she addressed him confirmed his instinctive repugnance.

'Eh, Aw'm glad ye've comed, sir!' she whined; 't' lass 'as fair been frettin' on 'erself to death for ye to come. Shoo's vary bad, is t' lass,' and the woman wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her dress—'t' doctor says she shoo'll noan last till morn.'

The woman manifested no delicacy with regard to her child's feelings. Delicacy in her had died long before.

'Mother! mother!' said a feeble voice from one corner; 'tell 'im to come 'ere.'

David's eye had already noted the bed and its occupant, and without vouchsafing any reply to the woman he stepped across the room.

An old packing-case, like that in which merchants pack their piece-goods for shipment, and which had doubtless been procured from one of the big warehouses hard by, lay on its side in the far corner by the mantelpiece. It was of large dimensions and extended fully half way into the room. A layer of straw on the top served as bedding, and another layer inside the case, the open end of which faced into the room, evidently provided a second bed. Here, ordinarily, the children slept, but Jinny had been lifted on to the upper bed—lifted there to die.

(To be continued.)

When the 'Coming Man' appears he will not have a cigar in his mouth, nor between his first and second fingers.