

Tales and Sketches.

THE SON OF MY FRIEND.

An O'er True Talo.

BY T. S. ARTHUR.

(Continued from last week.)

I neither ate nor drank anything. The most tempting dish had no allurements for my palate, and I shivered at the thought of tasting wine. I was strangely and unnaturally disturbed, yet forced to command myself, and affable and smiling to our guests.

"Observe Mrs. Gordon," I heard a lady near me say in a low voice to her companion.

"What of her?" was returned.

"Follow the direction of her eyes."

I did so, as well as the ladies near me, and saw that Mrs. Gordon was looking anxiously at one of her sons, who was filling his glass for, it might be, the second or third time.

"It is no place for that young man," one of them remarked. "I pity his mother. Tom is a fine fellow at heart, and has a bright mind; but he is falling into habits that will, I fear, destroy him. I think he has too much self-respect to visit bar-rooms frequently, but an occasion like this gives him a liberty that is freely used to his hurt. It is all very respectable, and the best people set an example he is too ready to follow."

I heard no more, but that was quite enough to give my nerves a new shock, and fill my heart with a new disquietude. A few minutes afterwards, I found myself at the side of Mrs. Gordon. To a remark that I made, she answered in an absent kind of way, as though the meaning of what I said did not reach her thought. She looked past me; I followed her eyes with mine, and saw her youngest boy, not yet eighteen, with a glass of champagne to his lips. He was drinking with a too apparent sense of enjoyment. The sigh that passed the mother's lips smote my ears with accusation.

"Mrs. Carleton!" A frank, cheery voice dropped into my ear. It was that of Alfred Martindale, the son of my friend. He was handsome, and had a free, winning manner. I saw, by the flush in his cheeks and the gleam in his eyes, that wine had already quickened the flow of blood in his veins.

"You are enjoying yourself," I said.

"Oh! splendidly!" Then, bending to my ear, he added, "You've given the finest entertainment of the season."

"Hush!" I whispered, raising my finger; then added, in a warning tone: "Enjoy it in moderation, Alfred."

His brows knit slightly. The crowd parted us, and we did not meet again during the evening.

By twelve o'clock, most of the ladies had withdrawn from the supper-room, but the enticement of wine held too many of the men there, young and old. Bursts of coarse laughter, loud exclamations, and snatches of song rang out from the company in strange confusion. It was difficult to realize that the actors in this scene of revelry were gentlemen and gentlemen's sons so-called, and not the coarse frequenters of a corner tavern.

Guests now began to withdraw quietly. It was about half-past twelve when Mrs. Martindale came down from the dressing-room with her daughter, and joined Mr. Martindale in the hall, where he had been waiting for them.

"Where is Alfred?" I heard the mother ask.

"In the supper-room, I presume; I've looked for him in the parlors," Mr. Martindale answered.

"I will call him for you," I said, coming forward.

"Oh! do, if you please," my friend replied. There was a husky tremor in her voice.

I went to the supper-room. All the ladies had retired, and the door was shut. What a scene for a gentleman's house presented itself! Cigars had been lighted, and the air was thick with smoke. As I pushed open the door, my ear fairly stunned by the confusion of sounds. There was a hush of voices, and I saw bottles from many hands set quickly upon the table, and glasses removed from lips already too deeply stained with wine. With three or four exceptions, all of this company were young men and boys. Near the door was the person I sought.

"Alfred!" I called; and the young man came forward. His face was darkly flushed, and his eyes red and glittering.

"Alfred, your mother is going," I said.

"Give her my compliments," he answered, with an air of mock courtesy, "and tell her that she has my gracious permission."

"Come!" I urged; "she is waiting for you."

He shook his head resolutely. "I'm not going for an hour, Mrs. Carleton. Tell mother not to trouble herself. I'll be home in good time."

I urged him, but in vain.

"Tell him that he *must* come!" Mrs. Martindale turned on her husband an appealing look of distress when I gave her Alfred's reply.

But the father did not care to assert an authority which might not be heeded, and answered, "Let him enjoy himself with the rest. Young blood beats quicker than old."

The flush of excited feeling went out of Mrs. Martindale's face. I saw it but for an instant after this reply from her husband; but, like a sun-painting, its whole expression was transferred to a leaf of memory, where it is as painfully vivid now as on that never-to-be-forgotten evening. It was pale and convulsed, and eyes full of despair. A dark presentiment of some thing terrible had fallen upon her—the shadow of an approaching woe that was to burden all her life.

My friend passed out from my door, and left me so wretched that I could with difficulty rally my feelings to give other parting guests a pleasant word. Mrs. Gordon had to leave in her carriage without her sons, who gave no heed to the repeated messages she sent to them.

At last all the ladies were gone; but there still remained a dozen young men in the supper-room, from whence came to my ears a sickening sound of carousal. I sought my chamber, and, partly disrobing, threw myself upon a bed. Here I remained in a state of wretchedness impossible to describe for over an hour, when my husband came in.

"Are they all gone?" I asked, rising.

"All, thank God!" he answered, with a sigh of relief. Then, after a moment's pause, he said: "If I live a thousand years, Agnes, the scene of to-night shall never be repeated in my house. I feel not only a sense of disgrace, but worse—a sense of guilt. What have we been doing? Giving our influence and our money to help in the work of elevating and refining society, or in the work of corrupting and debasing it? Are the young men who left our house a little while ago as strong for good as when they came in? Alas! alas! that we must answer No! What if Alfred Martindale were our son?"

This last sentence pierced me as if it had been a knife.

"He went out just now," continued Mr. Carleton, "so much intoxicated that he walked straight only with an effort."

"Why did you let him go?" I asked, fear laying suddenly its cold hand on my heart. "What if harm should come to him?"

"The worst harm will be a night at the station-house, should he happen to get into a drunken brawl on his way home," my husband replied.

I shivered as I murmured, "His poor mother!"

"I thought of her," replied Mr. Carleton, "as I saw him depart just now, and said to myself bitterly, 'To think of sending home from my house to his mother a son in that condition!' And he was not the only one."

We were silent after that. Our hearts were so heavy that we could not talk. It was near daylight before I slept, and then my dreams were of so wild and strange a character that slumber was brief and unrefreshing.

The light came dimly in through half-drawn curtains on the next morning, when a servant knocked at my door.

"What is wanted?" I asked.

"Did Mr. Alfred Martindale sleep here last night?"

I sprang from bed, strangely agitated, and, partly opening the chamber door, said, in a voice whose unsteadiness I could not control, "Why do you ask, Katie? Who wants to know?"

"Mrs. Martindale has sent to enquire. The girl says he didn't come home last night."

"Tell her that he left our house about two o'clock," I replied and, shutting the chamber door, staggered back to the bed, and fell across it, all my strength gone for the moment.

"Send her word to enquire at one of the police stations," said my husband bitterly.

I did not answer, but lay in a half-stupor, under the influence of benumbing mental pain. After a while I arose, and, looking out, saw everything clothed in a white mantle, and the snow falling in large flakes, heavily but silently, through the still air. How the sight chilled me! That the air was piercing cold I knew by the delicate frost-pencillings all over the window-panes.

After breakfast I sent to Mrs. Martindale a note of enquiry about Alfred. A verbal answer came from the distracted mother, saying that he was still absent, and that enquiry of the police had failed to bring any intelligence in regard to him. It was still hoped that he had gone home with some friend, and would return during the day.

Steadily the snow continued to fall, and, as the wind had risen since morning, it drifted heavily. By ten o'clock it was many inches deep, and there was no sign of abatement. My suspense and fear were so oppressive that, in spite of the storm, I dressed myself, and went out to call on my friend. I found her in her chamber, looking very pale, and calmer than I had hoped to find her. But the calmness I soon saw to be a congelation of feeling. Fear of the worst had frozen the wild waves into stillness.

"God knows best," she said, in a voice so sad that its tones ached through my heart. "We are all in his hands. Pray for me Agnes, that I may have strength. If he does not give me strength, I shall die."

I shivered; for both in voice and look were signs of wavering reason.