

Choice Literature.

JACK.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, author of "The Gates Ajar," etc., is the writer of the following powerful tale, illustrative of the ruin wrought by the drink curse. It appears in the June number of *The Century*:

Jack was a Fairharbor boy. This might be to say any of several things; but it is at least sure to say one,—he was a fisherman, and the son of a fisherman.

When people of another sort than Jack's have told their earthly story through, the biography, the memorial, the obituary remains. Our poet, preacher, healer, politician, and the rest pass on to this polite sequel which society has ordained for human existence. When Jack died, he stops. We find the fisherman squeezed into some corner of the accident column: "Washed overboard," or "Lost in the fog," and that is the whole of it. He ends just there. There is no more Jack. No fellow members in the Society for Something-or-Nothing pass resolutions to his credit, and the consolation of his family. No funeral discourse is preached over him and printed at the request of the parishioners. The columns of the religious weekly to which he did not subscribe contain no obituary sketches signed by the initials of friends not thought to be too afflicted to speak a good word for a dead man. From the press of the neighbouring city no thin memorial volume sacred to his virtues and stone blind to his defects shall ever issue. Jack needs a biographer. Such the writer of this sketch would fain aspire to be.

Jack was born at sea. His father was bringing his mother home from a visit at a half-sister's in Nova Scotia, for Jack's mother was one of those homesick, clannish people who pine without their relations as much as some of us pine with them; and even a half sister was worth more to her in her fanciful and feeble condition than a whole one is apt to be to bolder souls.

She made her visit at her half-sister's, and they had talked over receipts, and compared yeast, and cut out baby things, and turned dresses, and dyed flannel, and gone to prayer meetings together; and Jack's mother was coming home, partly because Jack's father came for her, and partly because he happened to come sober, which was a great point, and partly because the schooner had to sail, which was another,—she was coming home, at all events, when the gale struck them. It was an ugly blow. The little two-masted vessel swamped, in short, at midnight of a moonlight night, off the coast, just the other side of seeing Cape Ann light. The crew were picked up by a three-master, and taken home. Aboard the three-master, in fright and chill and storm, the little boy was born. They always put it that he was born in Fairharbor. In fact, he was born rounding Eastern Point. "The toughest place to be borned in this side o' Torment," Jack's father said. But Jack's mother said nothing at all.

Jack's father kept sober till he got the mother and the child safely into the little crumbling, gray cottage in half of whose meagre dimensions the family kept up the illusion which they called home. Then, for truth compels me, I must state that Jack's father went straightway out upon what, in even less ob-scure circles, it is customary to call "a tear." There seems to be something in the savage, incisive fitness of this word which has overridden all mere distinctions of class or culture, and must ultimately make it a classic in the language. "I've stood it long as I ken stand, an I'm goin' on a tear,—I'm a-goin' on a *neta* tear," said Jack's father to his eldest dory-mate, a fellow he had a feeling for, much as you would for an oar you had handled a good many years; or perhaps a sail that you were used to, and had patched and watched and knew the cracks in it, and the colour of it, and when it was likely to give way, and whereabouts it would hold.

In fact that proved to be, in deed and truth, an eternal tear for Jack's father. Drunk as a fisherman could be,—and that is saying a good deal,—he reshipped that night, knowing not whether nor why, nor indeed knowing that the deed was done; and when he came to himself he was twelve hours out, on his way to the Banks of Newfoundland; and the young mother, with the baby on her arm, looked out of the frosty window over the foot of her old bedstead, and watched for him to come, and did not like to tell the neighbours she was short of fuel.

She was used to waiting—women are; Fairharbor women always are. But she had never waited so long before. And when, at the end of her waiting, the old dory-mate came in one night and told her that it happened falling from the mast because he was not sober enough to be up there, Jack's mother said she had always expected it. But she had not expected it all the same. We never expect trouble, we only fear it. And she had put the baby on the edge of the bed, and got upon her knees upon the floor, and laid her face on the baby, and tried to say her prayers,—for she was a pious little woman, not knowing any better, but found she could not pray, she cried so. And the old dory-mate told her not to try, but to cry as hard as she could. And she told him he was very kind; and so she did. For she was fond of her husband although he got drunk; because he got drunk, one is tempted to say. Her heart had gone the way of the hearts of drunkard's wives; she had loved in proportion to her misery, and gave on equation with what she lost. All the woman in her mothered her husband when she could no longer wisely worship him. When he died she felt as if she had lost her eldest child. So, as I say, she kneeled with her face on the baby, and cried as if she had been the blessedest of wives. Afterward she thought of this with self-reproach. She said one day to the old dory-mate:

"When my trouble came, I did not pray to God. I'd ought to have. But I only cried at Him."

Jack had come into the world in a storm, and he began it stormily. He was a big, roaring baby, and he became a restless boy. His mother's gentle and unmodified femininity was wholly helpless before the problem of this wholly masculine little being. She said Jack needed a man to

manage him. He smoked at six; he lived in the stables and on the wharves at eight; he came when he got ready, and went when he pleased; he obeyed when he felt like it, and when he was punished, he kicked. Once, in an imaginative moment, he bit her.

She sent him to Jack mackerel, for they were put to it to keep soul and body together, and he brought home such habits of speech as even the Fairharbor women had never heard. From her little boy, her baby,—not yet old enough to be out of short trousers, and scarcely out of little sacks, had he been yours, my Lady; at the pretty age when one still fastens lace collars round their necks, and has them under shelter by dark, and hears their prayers, and challenges the breath of heaven lest it blow too rudely on some delicate forming fibre of soul and body—from her little boy, at eight years old, the mother first learned the abysses of vulgarity in a seaport town.

It must be admitted that her education in this respect had been defective. She had always been one of the women in whose presence her neighbours did not speak too carelessly.

But Jack's mother had the kind of eyes which do not see mire,—the meek, religious, deep-blue eye which even growing sons respect while they strike the tears from it. At his worst Jack regarded her as a species of sacred fact, much like heaven or a hymn. Sometimes on Sunday nights he stayed at home with her; he liked to hear her sing. She sang "Rock of Ages," in her best black alpaca with her work-worn hands crossed upon the gingham apron, which she put on to save the dress.

But ah, she said, Jack needed a man to manage him. And one day when she said this, in spite of her gentle unconsciousness, or because of it, the old dory-mate, to whom she had said it, said he thought so too, and said if she had no objection he would like to be that man.

And the Fairharbor widow, who had never thought of such a thing, said she didn't know as she had; for nobody knew, she said, how near to starving they had come; and it was something to have a sober man. So, on this reasonable basis, Jack acquired a step-father, and his step-father sent him straightway to the Grand Banks.

He meant it well enough, and perhaps it made no difference in the end. But Jack was a little fellow to go fishing,—only ten. His first voyage was hard; it was a March voyage; he got badly frostbitten, and the skipper was rough. He was knocked about a good deal, and had the measles by himself in his berth; and the men said they didn't know they had brought a baby to the Banks, for they were very busy; and Jack laid and cried a little, and thought about his mother, and wished he hadn't kicked her, but forgot it when he got well. So he swaggered about among the men, as a boy does when he is the only one in a crew, and aped their talk, and shared their grog, and did their hard work, and learned their songs, and came home with the early stages of moral ossification as well set in upon his little heart as a ten-year-heart allows.

The next voyage did not mend the matter; nor the next. And though the old dory-mate was an honest fellow, he had been more successful as a dory-mate than he was as a step-father. He and Jack did not "get on." Sometimes Jack's mother wondered if she had needed a man to manage him; but she never said so. She was a good wife, and she had fuel enough, now; she only kissed Jack and said she meant it for the best, and then she went away and sang "Rock of Ages" to the tune of Martyn, very slow, and quite on the wrong key. It seemed to make her feel better, poor thing. Jack sometimes wondered why.

When he was twelve years old he came home from a winter voyage one night, and got his pay for his share,—boy's pay, yet, for a boy's share; but bigger than it used to be,—and did not go home first, but went rollicking off with a crowd of Portuguese. It was a Sunday night, and his mother was expecting him, for she knew the boat was in. His step-father expected him too,—and his money; and Jack knew that. His mother had been sick, but Jack did not know that; she had been very sick, and had asked for him a great deal. There had been a baby,—born dead while its father was off shore after cod,—and it had been very cold weather; and something had gone wrong.

At midnight of that night some one knocked at the door of the crumbling cottage. The step-father opened it; he looked pale and agitated. Some boys were there in a confused group; they bore what seemed to be a lifeless body on a drag, or bob-ble; it was Jack, dead drunk.

It was the first time,—he was only twelve,—and one of the Fairharbor boys took the pipe from his mouth to explain:

"He was trapped by a Portygee, and they've stole every cent of him, 'n kicked him out 'n let him, stranded like a monk fish, so me and the other fellers we borreyed a sled and brung him home, for we thought his mother'd rather. He ain't dead, but he's just as drunk as if he was sixty!"

The Fairharbor boy mentioned this circumstance with a kind of abnormal pride, as if such superior maturity were a point for a comrade to make note of. But Jack's step-father went out softly and shut the door, and said:

"Look here, boys,—help me in with him, will you? Not tha' way. His mother's in there. She died an hour ago."

And so the curse of his heredity came upon him. She never knew, thank heaven. Her knowledge would have been a kind of terrible fore-omniscience, if she had. She would have no hope for him from that hour. Her experience would have left her no illusions. The drunkard's wife would have educated the drunkard's mother too "liber-ly" for that. She would have taken in the whole scope and detail of the future in one midnight moment's breath, as a problem in the higher mathematics may rest upon the width of a geometrical point. But she did not know. We say—I mean it was our fashion of saying,—that she did not know. God was merciful. She had asked for Jack, it seemed, over and over, but did not complain of him for not coming; she never complained of Jack. She said the poor boy must have stayed somewhere to have a pleasant time; and she said they were to give her love to him, if he came in while she was asleep. And then she asked her husband to sing "Rock of Ages" for her, because she did not feel very strong. He couldn't sing,—more than a halibut,

poor fellow; but he did not like to disappoint her, for he thought she looked what he called "miser'ble"; so he sat down by the bed, and raised his hoarse, weather-beaten voice to the tune of Martyn, as best he could, and mixed up two verses inextricably with a line from "Billy's on the Bright Blue Sea," which he added, because he saw he must have something to fill out, and it was all he could think of,—but she thanked him very gently, and said he sang quite well; and said once more that he was to give her love to Jack; and went to sleep afterward; and, by and by, they could not wake her to see her boy of twelve brought to her drunk.

The curse of his heredity was upon him. We may blame, we may loathe, we may wonder, we may despair; but we must not forget. There were enough to blame without remembering. Jack, like all drunkards, soon learned this. In fact he did not remember it very well himself,—not having been acquainted with his father; and never sentimentalized over himself, nor whined for his bad luck,—but owned up to his sins, with the bluntness of an honest, bad fellow. He was rather an honest fellow, in spite of all. He never lied when he was sober.

If the curse of his ancestry had come upon him, its compensatory temperament came too. Jack had the merry heart of the easy drinker.

Born with his father's alcoholized brain-cells, poor baby, endowed with the narcotized conscience which that species of parentage bequeaths, he fell heir to the kind of attractiveness that goes with the legacy.

He was a happy-go-lucky fellow. Life sat airily on him. He had his mother's handsome eyes dashed with his father's fun (for she couldn't take a joke to save her); he told a good story; he did a kind deed; he was generous with his money when he had any, and never in the least disturbed when he hadn't. He was popular to the dangerous extent that makes one's vices seem a kind of social introduction, and not in Jack's circle alone, he it said. Every crew wanted him. Drunk or sober, as a shipmate he was at par. It was usually easy for him to borrow. The fellows made up his fines for him; there was always somebody to go bail for him when he got before the police court. Arrested perhaps a half dozen times a year in his maddest years, he never was sent to the House in his life. There were always people enough who thought it a pity to let such a good fellow go to prison. He had—I was going to say as a matter of course he had—curly hair. One should not omit to notice that he was splendidly tattooed. He was proud, as seamen are, of his brawny arms, dashed from wrist to shoulder with the decorative ingenuity of his class. Jack had æsthetic views of his own, indeed, about his personal allowance of indigo. He had objected to the customary medley of anchors, stars and crescents, and exhibited a certain taste, which was rather interesting. On his left arm he bore a very crooked lighthouse rising from a heavy sea; he was, in fact, quite flooded along the bicipital muscle with waves and billows, but nothing interfered with the massive proportions of the effect. This was considered a masterly design, and Jack was often called upon to push up his sleeves, and explain how he came by the inspiration.

Under the other arm he wore a crucifix, ten inches long; this was touched with blood-red ink; the dead Christ hung upon it, lean and pitiful. Jack said he took the crucifix against his drowning. It was an uncommonly large and ornate crucifix.

Jack was a steady drinker at nineteen. At twenty-five he was what either an inexperienced or a deeply experienced temperance missionary would have called incurable. The intermediate grades would have confidently expected to save him.

Of course he reformed. He would not have been interesting if he had not. The unmitigated sot has few attractions even for seafaring society. It is the foil and flash, the by-play and side-light of character that "lead us on." Jack was always reforming. After that night when he was brought home on the bob-sled, the little boy was as steady and as miserable as he knew how to be for a long time; he drew the unfortunate inference that the one involved the other. By the time his mother's grave was green with the scanty Fairharbor churchyard grass,—for even the sea-wind seems to have a grudge against the very dead for choosing dry graves in Fairharbor, and scants them in their natural covering,—by that time rank weeds had overgrown the sorrow of the homeless boy. He and his step-father "got on" less than ever now, as was to be expected; and when one day Jack announced with characteristic candour that he was going to get drunk, if he went to Torment for it, the two parted company; and the crumbling cottage knew Jack no more. By and by, when his step-father was drowned at Georges, Jack borrowed the money for some black gloves and a hat band. He had the reputation of being a polite fellow; the fishermen spelled it *to-o-n-y*. Truth to tell, the old dory-mate had wondered sometimes on Sunday afternoons if he had been the man to manage Jack; and felt that the main object of his second marriage had been defeated.

Jack, as I say, was always reforming. Every temperance society in the city had a hand at him. They were of the old-fashioned, easy type which took their responsibilities comfortably. They held him out on a pair of moral tongs, and tried to toast his misdemeanors out of him, before a quick fire of pledges and badges; and when he tumbled out of the tongs, and asked the president and treasurer why they didn't bow to him in the street when he was drunk, or why, if he was good enough for them at the lodge room, he wasn't good enough to shake hands with before folks on the post office steps, or propounded any of those ingenious posers with which his kind are in the habit of disturbing the benevolent spirit, they snapped the tongs to, and turned him over to the Churches.

These touched him gingerly. They invited him into the free pews,—a dismal little row in the gallery,—sent him a tract or two, and asked him a few well-meant and very confusing religious questions to which Jack's replies were far from satisfactory. One ardent person, a recent convert, coaxed him into a weekly prayer meeting. It was a very good, honest, uninteresting prayer meeting, and there were people sitting there beside him with clean lives and clear faces,