

BOYS AND GIRLS

One Chance More.

(The Dawn of Day.)

CHAPTER I.

'Only I do beg of 'ee, sir, to consider the temptation!'

The voice that spoke was a woman's voice—trembling, beseeching, with a terrible urgency of supplication in its tones. And the eyes which were fixed upon Joseph Nargle's face were blue and soft—very pretty eyes, if they had not been dim and heavy with tears and care and pain. And in the middle of the bare cold room, into which one descended by three steps from the street outside, stood a shame-faced-slouching man of thirty—a man with all his manhood gone out of him for the time, because the day before he had been drinking heavily, and had disgraced himself, and Joseph Nargles who was his master, and the pale young wife who now pleaded for him with his stern employer.

'He haven't giv' way, sir, not for three years past,' the piteous voice went on. 'Not once, ever since we came down here to St. Cuthbert's, have he been the worse for drink till yesterday. I've blessed the day we left London, a many, many times. Always patient and kind, and putting up with poor ways contentedly—for poor we've been, along of having back-debts to pay off—and keeping hisself straight all along the line—that's been my Tom, ever since we settled here. And then yesterday some of them as he used to know came down for the races—which I wish they races was at the bottom of the sea, sir—and they got about him, and they was too much for him just for the— And oh, sir, I do beg of 'ee to consider the temptation!'

But no one had ever brought Joseph Nargles in this way before—perhaps because he was not a promising subject for such supplication—and he could not, by any means, consider the temptation. The kind of temptations which overcome poor weak-willed Tom Dixon were no temptations at all to him—drink and jollity and kindred indulgences held out no attractions to Joseph Nargles even in his youth. He was a man of strong firm nature, who had started at the foot of the ladder, and climbed steadily up to competence, and credit, and respect. In the course of his climbing he had found it expedient to deal hardly with the feeble folk who are apt to be a hindrance and a clog; and he was not going to deal softly with his unsatisfactory clerk now, because a woman young enough to be his daughter poured out her heart before him with tears.

'Nonsense!' he said, very gruffly, when her entreaties escaped. 'Your husband's a bad lot; I can see that. I won't have a clerk of mine getting drunk on the race-course with a set of bad associates down from town. Not given way for three years, hasn't he? And what sort of life will he lead you in the future, if I pass over this misconduct of his?— The day week, Dixon, you'll be good enough to suit yourself with another place. And you needn't refer to me for a character, unless you want a true one—understand?'

The miserable Dixon had great difficulty in speaking at all. His voice was husky, and his whole look expressed despairing humiliation.

All he could manage to say was, 'It shan't occur again, sir. One more chance!'

And then he stood with his bent head, his look of conscious degradation; and poor Alice turned away, and hid her face in her apron.

He was a Londoner, born and bred: and she, with her softer broader speech and her clean striving ways, came of good honest country folk, down in Dorsetshire.

And Tom's ways were bitter to her, not only on account of the poverty and difficulty which came as a consequence of his errors. But she loved him, with the unselfish love which is strong to save; and during these three years at St. Cuthbert's he had been a better man, and Alice had hoped all things—hoped for a time of ease and comfort when the 'back-debts' were paid—hoped that little Jemmy and Tommy and Milly would always be able to look up to 'Father' and trust in him, knowing nothing of those by-gone years.

And now had come the sudden shattering of all these hopes; and she felt that her plea for mercy had made no impression whatever on the mind of Mr. Nargles—that there was no response to her pleading—no relenting in the heart of the master. Tom was not to have 'one more chance'—alas, that he should have needed it! He was to lose the good place, with its certain wage; and he would go from it suddenly, without



HE STUMPED OUT OF THE ROOM.

a character. And before his unstable feet would spread that downward slope, the end of which was known to Alice, who had seen other Toms whom she did not love go slipping down to the bottom of it, dragging wives and children after them.

And he had kept steady for three years—would have kept steady always, she thought, but for the force of the temptation which Mr. Nargles could not be brought to consider.

'"One chance more!"' said the master very scornfully, in the silence. 'You've had more chances than you knew what to do with, I'll be bound. And you won't have any more, here, at my expense. I'm sorry for your wife—a tidy body as need be; but should have known better than to take up with the like of you. This day week, mind ye; and just be careful not to go on the spree till your time with me is up, will you? Then you can go to the dogs your own way, with no questions asked.'

He stumped out of the room, which looked barer and colder and greyer than ever—for hope went out with Joseph Nargles, and only tears and despair remained behind. The tears were not Alice's; perhaps she had wept so much that the fountain of her grief was dried up. It was the man, with his shaken nerves and his utter loss of self-

respect, who broke down into weeping, flinging out his arms across the table and leaning his throbbing head upon them.

'It's not so much to ask,' he groaned. 'Just one chance more!'

'Oh, dear Tom!' said poor Alice, with the great tenderness of a loving nature which has been sorely tried—'do 'ee think of it—Do 'ee consider that us must come to the last chance some day!—Not yet—oh, please God, not yet—but 'tis not for we to know when He do take and try us for the last time. And I can bear the poverty, and all else—if so be you'll rouse up manful, so as I can be proud of 'ee—'

His laugh was bitter in its mingled shame and bravado.

'Proud of me!' he said.

But she came near him and put her arms round him; and there was healing in her touch and comfort in her kiss upon the burning forehead.

'Think of they three years!' she said. 'Oh, Tom—my man that have been good to me and the little 'uns—sure, God Almighty will remember they three years!—Mr. Nargles mayn't understand the cost of it—but He knows. And may be He will send us the one chance more!'

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Joseph Nargles was a person of considerable importance in St. Cuthbert's, the busy seaport town in which his industrious life had been passed. There was old St. Cuthbert's and new St. Cuthbert's—and all the week Mr. Nargles worked in his office and counting-house in the new town near the Quay, where the hum of business went on from dawn to dusk, and on Sunday morning he turned his steps regularly to old St. Cuthbert's, where he was one of the churchwardens. Learned people were constantly at variance as to the precise antiquity of St. Cuthbert's Church—the original St. Cuthbert's from which the town took its name—but folks on the spot were content to say that it had stood there 'a vast number of years,' without going into any precision of detail. Some doubted whether there had ever been a time when St. Cuthbert's was not—when the old grey tower on the hill was not there to be a beacon to mariners, with a light set in the belfry in boisterous weather. And one old salt had been heard to say that he 'reckoned that 'ere was one of the first churches they set to and built arter the Flood.'

Further than this no reasonable man could wish to go back; and the researches of the Antiquarian Society were considered rather a waste of time in St. Cuthbert's.

This fussy society, however, had taken upon itself to point out to the local authorities that the crypt of their wonderful old church was in rather a bad way; and that unless repairs were set in hand, disaster might happen. Repairs had accordingly been ordered, after due delay and consideration; and the work had gone on at the slow rate which is usual in such cases.

According to contract, it was to be finished that day; and Mr. Nargles, walking briskly through the bright sunshine and cold wind of the March afternoon, was going to take a look round before the workmen left the scene of their labors. He did not feel at all disturbed by the interview which was just over, but still his thoughts turned back to it, as was natural.

'A poor, half-baked kind of chap, that clerk of mine,' he was thinking. 'Not a bad clerk, neither—not altogether bad. In-