

BOYS AND GIRLS

THE RED, RED WINE:

A TEMPERANCE STORY.

THE REV. J. JACKSON WRAY'S LAST STORY.

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CHAPTER I.

It was Sabbath morning. The midsummer glory was over all. Midsummer scents and sounds filled the genial air, and the melodious music of the Netherborough bells, wafted across field and brook and garden, fell upon the ears of the church-going towns-folk as a fitting accompaniment. Never since they left the moulds of the bell-foundry had they given forth mellow music than on that Midsummer Sabbath morning, full fifty years ago.

That, at any rate, was the opinion of old Aaron Brigham, as he left his little cottage on the Spaldon Road, and bent his steps towards 'Zion Chapel.'

Try to get a good look at him. See, he doffs his new felt hat respectfully as the Vicar passes by. The vicar has a warm, hearty greeting for his aged parishioner, though he is going like a stray sheep to the conventicle yonder. Mr. Bartley knows old Aaron well, and admires and respects him; and Aaron, staunch Nonconformist as he is, never bends his head in 'Zion' without offering a prayer for the Vicar in his desk and pulpit, that God will 'help him from on high, an' give him a good tahme while he leads his congregation i' prayer, an' praise, an' while he breaks to 'em the bread o' life.'

Aaron's locks, long and thin, silky white in texture and in color; and, in the light of the midsummer morning, it is not any great stretch of fancy to imagine a halo round them, and sure I am, that never a saint in his calendar could have carried his coronal more fittingly than he. The old man is tall in stature still, though the burden of his four-score years has bowed him somewhat. His step is wonderfully firm and steady, and with the aid of his 'trusty staff,' he can get over the ground a good deal more quickly than some of his contemporaries, who are twenty years his junior.

Just as old Aaron was nearing his destination, he was met by a little maid of some six summers, or seven at most. She came bounding towards him, as with an absolute certainty that a loving reception awaited her. She was very poorly clad; the boots upon her feet were so worn and broken that they were scarcely deserving of the name, and her little frock was but 'a thing of shreds and patches.' It was an old young face, painfully pinched and pale, that looked up into the old man's eyes; but the glad smile that beamed all over it at the sight of him, brought out an innocent beauty that sorrow had failed to kill. The little fingers that twined around the horny hand of the aged patriarch were rough, and red, and swollen, with such labor as never ought to be the hap of so wee a toiler. The old man bent low and kissed her, then lifted her in his arms, and kissed her again, as he said:

'Why, Kitty, my bairn! My sweet lahtle Kitty. What's browt thee here this mornin'? Is the goin' te t' chapil wi' me?'

Kitty looked at her ragged frock, and broken boots; and as the smile left her face, she shook her head sadly, and heaved a half sigh, half sob, and dropped her curly little head on the old man's shoulder.

'Niver mind, lahtle lassie!' said Aaron tenderly, patting her back in soothing fashion. 'I might ha' knoan. Niver mind. Thoo can say thy prayers at home, can't tha? What hez tha' cum for, Kitty?'

'Only to see you,' she whispered lovingly, and folding her little arms around his neck, she kissed him again and again.

Then she gave him to understand that the interview was over, that her object was attained, and climbing down from her sweet resting-place, she hastened away, as fast as her wee legs could carry her, to the mean and miserable shelter which she called 'home!'

'Poor lahtle Kitty!' said Aaron to himself, as he entered the Chapel.

The Master of the House, and he alone, knew how earnestly, how lovingly, how pleadingly, Aaron Brigham prayed that morning for 'lahtle Kitty,' for her 'feyther,' and her 'home.'

Aaron had a 'good time' at Zion that morning. His heart and soul were filled with strong sympathy and desire for another's well-being, though the other was only a ragged maiden from the street. That is worship such as our Elder Brother dearly loves and owns; and the Jewish proverb is true, my masters, true as the dear love of Christ, 'He that prays for another is heard for himself.'

There must have been some show of all this in Aaron Brigham's bearing as he strode home with buoyant step and cheerful mien. He was met on the way by two of the towns-folk, George Caffer, the painter, and Philip Lambert, the barber.

'Hallo, Aaron,' said Caffer, with a ready jeer, he had already had to have a 'refresher' at the sign of the 'Swinging Gate,' day of rest though it was. 'Why, where ha' yo' been, man? You should ha' been with us. My word, but it hez been grand. What ha' yo' been doin'? You look as though summat was worth fetchin'; quite blithe like, and lithe-some as a young four-year-old.'

'Hey, that you do,' interposed Lambert, with a view to uphold his comrade.

Aaron stood still, drew himself up to his full height, looked down with a serene smile on the two cronies who were trying to draw him out, and said,

'An' so would you if you'd had sense to be where I was, an' to hear what I've hecard.'

'Where? What? Tell us?' said they in a breath.

'I've been to the readin' o' my Feyther's will.'

'O, that's it, is it?' said Caffer, with a sneer, fully understanding the allusion. 'An' how much has He left yo', eh?'

'A hundred-fold more in this present life, and in the world to come, life everlasting.'

As the old man spoke, his face bore witness to the wealth of his present legacy, and as he lifted his eyes to the cloudless heavens overhead, the silenced listeners felt that he had 'a good hope through grace' of the bequest of glory that would fall to him by-and-by.

'Good mornin', neighbors,' said Aaron, as the shallow pair passed onward; 'an' don't forget that your names are in the will.'

'Phil,' said George Caffer, as they sauntered homeward, 'there must be something in it after all.'

'Aye, lad,' quoth Lambert, not without a certain reverence in his tone, 'if there was more Aaron Brigham's about, there would be fewer "septics," as they call us. But the bulk on 'em isn't up to sample, an' their faith shakes hands wi' their works so seldom, that I for one think precious lahtle about either.' Then there fell upon them a spell of silence as they turned to watch the aged 'preacher of righteousness,' until he passed into the little garden which confronted his cottage home.

'Come in, Aaron. Come in. Your dinner's waitin' for yo', an' it's never right to spoil good vitals by lettin' 'em get cowed before yo' eat 'em.'

The dispenser of the invitation just quoted was Esther Harland, the middle-aged and most capable housekeeper, who had constituted herself the keeper of Aaron, as well as of his house, and who fulfilled her self-imposed mission cheerily and well.

'Look here, owd friend,' she insisted, pointing to the well-plenished round table in the middle of the kitchen floor, 'You never had a nicer meal o' meat since the day you wore short frocks, tho' I daresay a worse 'un tast-

ed better i' them days. Cum an' hev it while its warm.'

A smile flitted across Esther's pleasant face as she pictured to herself tall old Aaron in the juvenile garb referred to, and laying her hand on his arm, she gently forced him into the Windsor chair placed ready for him.

'Why to tell the truth, Esther, I was in no great hurry. I was hevin' a good meal o' meat all to myself, standin' among them pratty roses i' the sunshine, an' thinkin' o' what my Heavenly Feyther's preparin'—'

'Preparin',' said Esther, whose mind was set just then on far more material things. 'I should think you could afford to let what's preparin', as you call it, wait a bit till it's wanted, an' take your chance when yo' hev' it o' mekin' the best o' what is prepared already,—an' that's your dinner. Ask a blessin' on it, Aaron. I feel a bit sharp set myself.'

'O,' said Aaron, dryly, 'that explains it,' and quietly did as he was told, for the old man had a vein of humor in him.

Now it was during this same midsummer month of June, that Netherborough came to be a place of excitement, without parallel in the history of the place. The oldest inhabitant declared that he had seen nothing like it since the day when the big bon-fire was kindled on the market hill to celebrate the final defeat of 'Bonyparty' at Waterloo.

CHAPTER II.

Not even at the 'Illumination,' as it was called in local history, at the coronation of Queen Victoria, were the people of Netherborough so greatly stirred as now. And yet that was a time. I can remember it, though I was but 'a wee bit bairnie,' at the time. Every window in the town had a lighted candle in it, and many windows had a candle gleaming in every pane. Many of these candles were wax, blue, red, green, yellow, my goodness! and as tall as a walking-stick, and as thick as a man's wrist. The children of the various Sunday Schools had each a medal and a ribbon, and marched through the town, all but bowed to the earth with pride, and then feasted on the fat of the land until they could scarce walk home for the weight they carried. O, but that was a day.

Still, Netherborough had never, never been so profoundly stirred as now. Aaron Brigham himself was as much excited as his juniors.

On the market hill, at the churchyard corner, in front of the Netherborough Arms, and elsewhere, clusters of townsfolk were discussing the news of the day; the news, mark you, news which, after all, was scarcely discussible, for this reason, that it almost took their breath away.

There was to be a York and Netherborough Railway!

It was situated about half-way between the ancient city of York and the thriving seaport of Kingston-upon-Hull. It was a region of large and fertile farms, and its crops of wheat and other cereals were noted alike for quality and quantity far beyond the boundaries of the Riding and the shire. The chronic difficulty was that of transportation—how to get the grain, the roots, the cattle, and other agricultural produce to market, for markets of value and importance were so very far away.

'If we only had a railway,' the town folk said, 'we could compete with all the county,' and they proudly added, 'we could hold a foremost place in the competition, too.' Even while they longed for it, they laughed at the idea of getting it, and honestly thought that to ask for it would be as futile a request as the proverbial operation of crying for the moon.

The French have a proverb to the effect that it is the impossible that happens. It will hardly pass muster, perhaps, for absolute