

The Drunkard's Daughter.

I.

Jack Tretop was on his way home, sullen, his heart full of wickedness, and drunker than usual.

It was a very curious thing about Jack Tretop, that he rarely, if ever, found his way home in any other condition than this; and there were not wanting some reputed wise men in the neighbourhood who were ready to recklessly hazard their existence on the truth of the conclusion, that had he taken it into his head any night to come home sober, it would have been absolutely impossible for him to have found the house.

Of course, he never thought of giving himself so much trouble as this, and it seemed as though his drunkenness became worse, and his wickedness more wicked, the very instant his foot touched his own threshold, wherein was the only being in the wide world who loved and watched him and took care of him.

People said he had killed his wife. His wife, could her testimony have been procured, would have said he hadn't—of course, she wouldn't!—and Jack Tretop would have chimed in with her handsomely and cursed the people up and down into the bargain. He took no blame on himself for it—not he! and for all the wreck and ruin in which it was the greatest and the termination, he acknowledged no responsibility.

Professedly cognizant of his demerits, the enumeration of all the faults known to mortal man elicited no admission from Jack that he possessed a single one of them. Nor did this amiable peculiarity assert itself in a like fashion in his recognition of his wife. On the contrary, the virtues and love-deserving qualities on the other side of the house were distorted with the greatest ease to serve as the gravest faults. For this would-be-thought-a-martyr persisted, with a ridiculous obstinacy, which increased in proportion as the belief in his vice, his harshness and the brutish results of his love of drink became more general, that the noble-minded wife, with her ever-proffered forgiveness, her cheering word, and her patient, forbearing spirit, was foremost among the persons whom he termed his persecutors; that the sitting-up for him past the hour of midnight—so weary after her hard day's work, that, as a means to wakefulness, she feigned the employment of those tears, which, poor soul! she knew were only too ready to flow of their own accord—was simply for the purpose of collecting material for a denunciation of him to the neighbours later on in the morning; and that, in short, he was the most abused, the most belittled and the most innocent man that ever was created. When his wife died everyone thought he would turn over a new leaf. But he didn't—or if he did, he only turned it half way; and it was a merciful thing for one other woman that he did not marry again, although little Widow Bailey, who kept the store full of sweetmeats on the corner, used to say that it was only the drunken carrying-on that was the matter with Jack Tretop; that you could not have found a better man, when he was sober, if you had hunted the whole world over, and that she, being a widow, was ready to take Jack Tretop whenever he liked to say the word.

Jack was often drunk at the "shop." The shop belonged to James Dricken & Co., brass and iron founders, and as Jack was a good workman, at any time, he contrived to get drunk on a great many occasions without any notice being taken of it; so that it seemed as though nobody cared whether he got drunk or not. But Jack did not stop at that. It was certainly a privilege which had been jumped at by a great many other men, but Jack wearied of it. Fighting was better—and enjoyed concurrently with the other:—positive bliss. The poor fellow had no one to fight with at home now. To be sure, there was Lilly; but she did not suit him exactly, and although he treated her to a cuff now and then, to keep himself from going crazy through sheer inactivity, he sighed for larger game. And in the shop, one fine afternoon, he found his larger game, and a lively time he had with it, and came

out second. Fate was against him truly, for while he was glad to retire with that distinction, he found that he had not only got out of a scrape, but out of a situation as well.

And that is the reason why Jack Tretop was on his way home, sullen, his heart full of wickedness, and drunker than usual.

II.

Yes; he was going home to his little daughter, Lilly. Lilly was the housekeeper now, and had father's supper keeping warm in the oven of the neat little stove, on which a little kettle sat, humming the water to boil for father's tea.

And Lilly was humming, too, while preparing things for father's return; now darting to the dresser, and jumping back again to the table; now deftly spreading the snowy cloth and placing father's knife and fork, with wonderful exactness, at the edge of the very centre of it, and at every dart and every jump breaking forth again in her humming with a corresponding force, so that it really seemed as though she and the little kettle on the stove were trying to out-do each other in their efforts to appear happy.

Let us follow the man for whom these preparations are making. A loving solicitude for father's precious neck had placed a lamp in the window facing the street, so that Jack Tretop is enabled by its bright path, to see just where to put his foot. Here, then, Jack—here's where some one thinks of you. Is it love? No, no; rubbish! It can't be. Fear, Jack, that's what it is—fear. Ha, ha! A chit of a girl! But don't deal hardly with the little thing, Jack. Though it's through fear—interest on only love—remember what she is to you.

The drunkard stumbles along the walk, jerks open the gate, and flinging it from him with a great bang, pounds heavily up the three steps—kept neat and clean by the little hands within. Ah! Jack; no one will gainsay you here at least. Here no one will dismiss you, nor remonstrate with you, nor speak to you harshly. Pooh! What is a handle to a spirited fellow like you? Burst it in and be done with it! There! And bravely done, Jack!

The heavy boot is through it in a trice, and the door flies open. Lilly shrinks back affrighted, but seeing her father, runs up and speaks to him kindly—gazing, gazing in his face. But she does not need to gaze long. She sees *it*; expects nothing else.

Look at her! A mere child—not more than eleven, at the very most—whose pale, set features, giving you not so much the idea of the consciousness of trouble and of well-dissembled fear, as of a little life of cares, which, though borne and gone through as if it had been in the natural course of things, has, yet insensibly, left its mark behind.

Poor child! She knows of no other life; of a happier home, where heavy blows are never dealt and unkind words unknown; knows nothing of a kind father, who gathers his children caressingly about him and forgets his cares and worries in their simple merriment. It is not for her to cope with Jack Tretop in his drunken moods, not for her to perish as the mother reached the grave—surely not!

The drunkard flings aside her helping hand and takes his place at the table, devouring his meal as only drunkards can, while Lilly, seated opposite, foresees and fills his every need. But Lilly has never seen her father in such a plight before. Despair is plainly perceptible in his face, even through the dreadful veil of intoxication, but it is still more apparent in his actions, in his reckless disregard for the uses of the articles that come to his hand; for although Jack's understanding has not been so impaired as to leave him ignorant of the precocity of the child's, he is sufficiently unmindful of her notice as to help himself to butter with the teaspoon, and—after the manner of his kind when a favourite article needs replenishing—to invert his plate, when he has emptied it, on the table. When Jack Tretop has finished, Lilly seats herself on the clean, bare floor beside him, and, raising her blue eyes, half-pleadingly, half-timidly, speaks to him.

"Tell me what has happened, father, please?"

Pooh! The child is bold, and Jack's shaggy brows come down with what may possibly be a crash, while two little indentations, resembling quotation marks, appear above his nose. It may be from the wicked fire in the little stove into which he is gazing, but—the child is bold, at any rate. No answer, but—yes: a curse! a something, of which, since the mother left her, she had not received quite so much as it was in the power of Jack Tretop to give. But he was still no niggard provider in this respect, and as it was a luxury which the child could very well do without, the erratic Jack felt the more impelled thereby to discharge himself of it in such measure as he withheld the common necessities of existence.

In this instance, however, he undergoes a singular change; the reason whereof is unknown, unless it be what he himself would ascribe: that the utterance unprecedentedly relieves. And as though he understood that the feeling is but momentary, he immediately discloses the cause of his gloom, which, he declares, is traceable to that cause, and to nothing else.

The child rises, shocked, and then, in her simple way, relates how the grocer had that morning refused her his wares until the bill for the last supply had been paid; how Dickey, in the dingy cage, which actually seems one hundred sizes too large for him, is without his delicious millet; and on giving some views of her own—like a careful little housekeeper that she is—on the propriety of their abridging the expenses, father's included, the drunkard flings out of his chair, and, with a dozen of oaths, raises his heavy hand—and is gone.

III.

The Widow Bailey's little sweetmeat shop was on a corner, as all well-regulated sweetmeat shops are; and as the widow, at a quarter before nine o'clock in the morning, was taking down the shutters, in the anticipation of the arrival of certain little spendthrifts on their way to school, and who regarded the little shop as a delightful half-way house as naturally as they did their school-room as a prison, it follows that she was on the corner, too. The principal thing in the north-east window of the little shop was a large theatrical show bill, which, representing as it did, a child and a fireman in the act of descending a flame-enveloped ladder with remarkably cheerful countenances, and representing, as it did *not*, whether the child was saving the fireman or the fireman the child, was the very thing to produce in the school children those spasms that are only to be relieved by sugar-sticks, jaw-breakers, or gum drops, or a mixture of the three. Now, the widow happened, on her return to the shop, to glance through the window at one side of this show bill, and what she saw at once disposed her to place her most saleable articles side by side on the little old show case, just where nobody could possibly help seeing them. But the widow was mistaken, for the first time in her life—which she could have told you, without a quiver or contortion of the face, had been a long one by no means. It was only Lilly—Lilly Tretop—with a black mark on her right cheek and her eyes, notwithstanding all her efforts to make them otherwise, surrounded by a tell-tale red.

The widow was a person accustomed to surprises, of which she had sustained, and was then sustaining, one, that very morning on the discovery of another sweetmeat shop a step or two away, and which had been fraudulently established in the stillness of the night before; but when, by dint of some questioning and much loving persuasion, she had ground out of Lilly what had happened, she felt all the breath in her body leaving her. For she loved the child dearly, and her regard for Jack Tretop suffered in consequence.

And when Lilly attacked her with another surprise, in the shape of what the widow looked upon as an absurd proposition, one surprise jumped on another, and the third on them both, and they fought and struggled and kicked, until the little Widow Bailey, in her perplexity, opened her eyes to such a width and with such expression