

NELLY'S DARK DAYS

By the Author of "Lost in London."

CHAPTER VIII.

DEAD AND ALIVE AGAIN.

It was spring-time again—twelve months since his wife had died. The hedgerows were sweet with primroses and violets, whose fresh fragrance was full of sorrowful memories to Rodney. The years, which had changed him so much, had hardly touched the face of the country. Every step of the road was familiar and dear to him. Here were the nut-bushes, where he and his brothers had come nutting in the autumn, when he was a boy; they were fringed and tasselled with yellow catkins now. On the other side of the hedge lay the corn-fields, where they had all gone gleaming together in the harvest, as happy a time as any in the whole year. Yonder was the bank where the violets grew thickest, and where he had been used to seek the first-scented blossom for Ellen, before they were married. The wooden bridge over the shallow brook, whose water rippled round pebbles as bright as gems, where he had paddled barefoot when he was young—barefoot like little Nelly, only it had been sport to him; the willow trees dipping down into the stream; the cottage-roofs; but above all, the thatched roof of his own cottage home; all seemed to him like another world, compared with the noisy, bustling, tempting streets of Liverpool, where, in those parts to which he had sunk, there were none but sordid sights and sounds of misery. Oh! if Nelly had only lived a young life like his own!

He reached the garden-gate, and leaned against it, looking down the long, straight, narrow walk which led to the door. It stood open, and the sun was shining brightly into the house, lighting up for him the old, polished oak dresser, with the shelves above, well filled with plates and dishes. A lavender and rosemary bush grew close up to the door-sill, and the bees were humming busily about them. He could hear also the murmur of voices; the prattle of a child's voice talking gaily within, out of his sight. Once he saw Bessie cross the kitchen to the little pantry, but she did not glance his way, through the open door; and he lingered outside, scarcely knowing how he should make himself known to his mother, who believed he was dead.

She came to the door at last—a neat old woman, with a snow-white frill round her face, looking out through her horn spectacles upon her sunny garden; and Rodney, leaning over the gate, stretched out his hands towards her, unable to speak a word, except the low, murmured cry, "Mother! mother!" which reached her ears, though they had grown dull of hearing years ago.

For a minute or two old Mrs. Rodney stood still, gazing intently at the motionless figure leaning over her wicket, and then, almost in a voice of terror, she called out loudly, "Bessie." And in an instant Bessie was at her side, in the doorway, with her quick, sharp eyes fastened upon him.

"Bessie!" cried Rodney, in a louder voice than before, "I was not drowned, as you thought I was. I've been almost dead in the infirmary, but I didn't die. I've come home now, a changed man, if you and mother will take me in?"

Would they take him in? They could hardly hasten to the wicket fast enough, the old woman, with her short, unsteady steps, hanging on to Bessie's arm to prevent her from being the first to welcome her son. She threw her arms round his neck, and pressed many motherly kisses upon his haggard face, crying, "My boy! my boy!" while Bessie clasped his hand in both her hands, fondling and kissing it as if it was impossible to express her great and unexpected gladness. It seemed to Rodney as if they were making too much of him, and forgiving him too freely. They ought at least to hang back a little from such a sinner as he.

"Mother," he said sadly, "You know all about my poor little Nelly."

"Yes, yes, my son," she answered, "I know it all; but now you've come home safe and sound, after we thought you were dead, we cannot remember all that. Nelly forgot it long ago."

"Ah!" cried Rodney, with a heavy sigh. "Nelly's happier than ever she was in her life," said Bessie, "and she'll be happier now. It was a good change for her to be took away from those dirty streets, where everybody about her was getting drunk. She was never so well off as now."

"I know it," answered Rodney. "And though the pain was very bad," continued Bessie, soothingly, "she's forgotten it all by now. She's never in any pain, and she's singing as happy as an angel all day long. I wouldn't fret about that if I was you. We've forgot it, and now you've come home again, though I was sure and positive you were drowned. I said so before the coroner; and Mr. Rodney, please, I followed you to the grave."

Bessie burst into an hysterical fit of laughter and sobbing, which she could hardly conquer, and she ran back along the garden-path, leaving Rodney and his mother to follow more slowly. His mother was hanging fondly on his arm; and before he entered the cottage he paused and lifted his old hat from his head.

"Please God," he said, earnestly, "I'll be a different man to what I've ever been; and may he at last bring me to where my poor wife and little Nelly are gone!"

"Father!" cried a sweet, childish voice inside the cottage, a voice he had never thought to hear again in this world: "where is father, Bessie?"

How he crossed the threshold, and passed into sight of his child, he could never tell. But there was Nelly before his eyes, her wan, small face unchanged, save for a faint tinge of colour in her cheeks, and a happy light in her eyes. She was lying on a little couch beneath the lattice window, a doll beside her, and a cup of violets on the windowsill; peaceful and happy, with a childish patience and sweetness in her face. Her arms were stretched out to him, and her features began to quiver with eagerness as he stood awe-stricken and motionless. Bessie drew him to her side, and he fell down on his knees, with his gray head upon the pillow, while she laid her arm about his neck. He had no voice to tell them what he had thought during these terrible months, and with what a shock of rapture it came over him to find that his little Nelly was still living.

"Come," said Bessie, in a tone of comforting, "don't take on so, please, Mr. Rodney. We never thought as Nelly would pull through at all; and she's not in any pain; are you, darling?"

"No," answered Nelly, pressing her arm closer about him; "are you come home to stay, daddy?"

Still Rodney could not speak, for his throat seemed dried up and choked. The child's voice grew plaintive and wistful.

"Oh! father," she said, "you're not going to get drunk any more, and make Granny, and Bessie, and me all poor and miserable again? You've come back to be good, aren't you, father?"

"God help me!" sobbed Rodney.

"We're all so happy now," continued Nelly pleadingly; "Bessie goes out to work, and Granny and me are alone all day, and at nights we sing, and I'm learning to read, and so is Bessie. And if you'll only be good, it'll be nicer than ever. You didn't mean to hurt me, I know; never, did you?"

He could not hold up his head yet, or answer her in any way, except by his reiterated cry, "God help me!"

"See, I've got a doll again," said Nelly in a gayer tone, to cheer him; "it's all my own, and it keeps me company all day and night too. The doctor says I shall never walk and run about like other children, but I don't mind that. I don't mind anything, now you're come home, if you'll only be good, and never get drunk, and make us all poor and ragged again. I shouldn't like to see poor Granny like mother was. You'll never do that, will you father?"

"Hush, Nelly!" said Bessie, as she saw Rodney shaking with his sobs, "hush! Father's come home to work, and get money for you; and we shall all be happier than ever now. If God wasn't going to help him to be good, now he's trying himself, he'd have let him be drowned in the river, and not brought him back here, to be a plague to us. There, Mr. Rodney, please get up, and sit down on this chair beside of little Nelly."

Rodney did as she told him, and sat still for a time, holding Nelly's small hand tightly in his own. He could scarcely believe that it was not all a dream.

In the long, sunny afternoon, with the bees humming at the door, and the scent of lavender and rosemary wafted in upon every breath of the fresh spring air, Rodney told them all that had happened to him, and the great change that had passed over him in the workhouse, and his interview with Mr. Radford the evening before. Then Bessie related to him the history of their lives.

"Mr. Rodney," she said, "when little Nelly came flying down them steps all in a flame, I met her just at the bottom, and I'd a big cloak on as was lent me by a woman I was friends with, and I wrapped it all round her, and quonched the fire. Then a woman as was in the crowd shouted, 'Take her to the Children's Hospital. They'll do well by her, if she isn't dead.' And I cried out, 'Oh! she is dead!' And then me and some other women carried her to the hospital, and at first they said she was dead, and then said she'd be sure to die. So I had to leave her there, and I came back to tell you, and you was gone, and Mrs. Simpson she said she'd see you go creeping off in the dark, and it 'ud be a good riddance if you never came back. And it was three days after they found somebody in the river and I was certain it was you, and I followed you to the churchyard, me and nobody else at all. And then I went to the hospital, and they said there was a little spark of hope, but if Nelly lived she'd never be good for anything. And I said, 'Never you mind. You make her live, and I'll take care of her after.' And then I came down here, walked every foot of the way, and told Mrs. Rodney, and she said, 'Bessie, as soon as that dear child is well enough, her and you shall have a home with me.' So as soon as Nelly could come we moved down to this place, and it's been like heaven to us—hasn't it, Nelly?"

"Yes," answered the child with a quiet smile. "But now you're come home as well," continued Bessie, blithely, "it'll be better than ever. It was bad to think of you being drowned, and never been the good man you ought to have been. I'm glad you've seen Mr. Radford; and glad you've made him a promise like me. And oh! I'm so glad you're going to be good and kind again at last. I always knew you'd be that, if it hadn't been for drink."

Long after the others had gone to bed, and were sleeping soundly and peacefully under the thatched roof, Rodney sat up by the cottage fire, brooding over his past life and that which lay before him, with many earnest prayers for light, and strength, and help. One thing was certain whatever other people might do who had never fallen captives to drunkenness, he must never touch the accursed thing again. He trembled to think of the snares that would be laid to entrap, and with what wary and watchful steps he must tread among them. He could not walk down the village street, or greet any one of his former friends, who had believed him dead, without being invited, urged and tempted to drink. He could not seek work where he should meet with fellow-workmen who would not mock at the pledge he had taken. He could not even sit among some religious people who would not despise him somewhat for his weakness. Whatever he did, wherever he went, in town or country, he would be forced into contact with drinking customs, which would assail him from without; while within there would ever be a treacherous foe ready to betray him. No other sin met with so constant a temptation. Yet, on the other hand, here was his little child restored to him from the dead; here his mother, so long broken spirited for him, and with so few days left which he could make happy; and here was Bessie, constant and faithful, true to the promises she made, his helper and example. Could he plunge them again into the depths from which God had delivered them? Rodney opened his mother's old Bible, with the large print which his own dim eyes needed now, and turning over page after page he found at last the promise he was searching for, and set an indelible mark against it to look at in after years: "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness."