

"Good Heavens! That child's dead!" And it was too true. In the cold streets, its head against the colder bosom of its unnatural parent, the child had died. But its death was peaceful. From the midst of the restless eager crowd, it had gone home. And it was better to die any where than to live. Up to the last moment of suffering our hearts go sadly with such a one, and we feel like weeping at every step; but when the heart ceases to beat, when the eye becomes dark, and the ear sealed forever to earthly sounds—then we breathe freely; our sadness is turned into a feeling of relief and thankfulness.

Well might the mother start at the strange words! Well might she shudder, when she looked down upon the image of clay that she held in her arms, and saw that it was but the effigy of her babe!

Starting up, with a low cry of horror and fear, Mrs. Lattimer covered the face of the dead child with her shawl, and turned, with hurried steps, homeward. The mother's heart was now reached, and it throbbed with anguish.—Trooping back upon her mind, came memories of neglect, wickedness and cruelty. She understood now, why the child had moaned all night, and why it had lain panting upon the breast of Agnes. The cruel blows from its father's hand, she felt upon her own heart. These were, perhaps, the bitterest moments of her whole life. As she went with rapid steps back to her house, her thoughts retraced, hurriedly, the last few years, until it came to the pleasant days she spent before the bottle entered, like a demon of evil, their happy home.—Lotty, with her bright eyes and waving curls, was before her, and she even heard, in memory, the gay laugh of the gladsome creature. Then a thick darkness seemed to shut down over her—and then she felt the dead form of Lotty in her arms.

All day Agnes was upon the street with her brother. Towards evening, she turned her steps homeward, tired, and with a troubled spirit. Hardly for a moment at a time, had the image of her sick sister been out of her mind. James was crying with cold and fatigue, and as they walked along he said that he wished he could die. Agnes made no answer to this; for she felt, young as she was, that it would be better to die than to live.

At last they reached home, with thirty-five cents, the result of their day's solicitations for charity. Thirty-five pennies! How many hundreds of cold repulses, harsh words and threats, had they endured in that weary day, before even so small a sum came into their hands! As Agnes entered, she went first to the bed on the floor, where she saw that Lotty had been laid, to look at and speak to the little sick one. Before her mother could prevent her, she had turned down the sheet that lay over the corpse, and the white face of Lotty was exposed to her eyes. She had never looked upon death before; but, no matter—she knew the ghastly signs too well; and with a bitter cry, let the sheet fall over the marble features, and sank in a passion of grief upon the floor.

The father and mother were sitting by the fire. With them, the bitterness of the first shock of grief, was, for the time over. They had consoled themselves with the bottle, and now felt much better. And ever and anon, during the evening of sorrow that followed, they took new draughts of consolation, until all was forgotten, and they fell asleep upon the floor.

A lonely watcher by the dead throughout that never-to-be-forgotten night, was the little girl who had loved the child so well. Of all she felt and thought, as the silent hours moved slowly away, no one but herself can know. Too far do such experiences come; but all who pass through them as young as she, receive impressions which nothing in after life can efface.

Day at last began to come dimly and coldly in, and then, with her head lying near that of the departed one, Agnes fell asleep and dreamed of the old and happy time. But her sleep was brief, and her waking full of sorrow.

While the father and mother again sought consolation in the bottle, Agnes was sent to the houses of people in the neighborhood, to whom she related a sad tale of poverty, suffering and death. Some gave her grave clothes, some money with which to buy a coffin; others said they would call round and see if her story was true, and one man, to whom she applied, on ascertaining the facts in the case, bought a plain coffin at an undertaker's and had it sent home. Into this the dead body was placed, and on the morning that followed, it was buried, at the public charge, in the "Potter's Field."

All through the night preceding the interment, Agnes again watched with the corpse, and watched alone. The bottle had locked up the souls and senses of her parents. With the morning light she again slept; but was soon aroused from sweet forgetfulness by the hand of her mother. The bottle was empty, and must be replenished. Hiding it under her apron, she descended to the street, and knowing that all the neighborhood were aware of her sister's death, she felt unwilling to go into any liquor-selling store near at hand, and so went off for two or three blocks. The drinking house she entered was that of Morrison, and the bottle she held in her hand was the same that had contained the tempting cordial, given as a bait to her father. Morrison knew her.

"Well, what do you want?" he said gruffly, as she came up to the counter.

"I want a pint of gin."

"How much money have you?" asked the landlord. "Let me see."

Agnes handed him a two-shilling piece, and said she wanted change.

Morrison took the money, and stepping back to the door upon which sundry small accounts were kept, pointed to a group of chalk marks, and said—

"Go home, child, and tell your father that I have passed the money to his account."

"Yes sir," said Agnes, not comprehending what he meant; and she remained standing by the counter.

"There, run home." And Morrison nodded his head towards the door.

"But you hav'n't given me the gin," said Agnes.

"No, nor don't mean to give it to you. Run away home and tell your father that I have kept the money in part payment for what he owes me."

Agnes understood this perfectly, and seeing by the expression of the man's face that remonstrance was hopeless, took up her bottle and went away.

When she told her mishap at home, even the presence of the dead child could not repress the sudden anger of the father; but he happened to be sober, and the few better feelings that remained in his bosom, arose, and soon controlled him. More money was given to Agnes, and this time she had better success. The bottle was replenished, and the parents sought in that the consolation it were vain to look for in their own thoughts.

At ten o'clock the dead cart came; and they looked their last look upon the face of Lotty. A rough man entered, screwed on the coffin lid, and bore the body carelessly away. Agnes felt as if she would suffocate with the struggling anguish pent up in her young breast, and little Jimmy wept as if his heart were breaking; but the parents consoled themselves with the bottle.