

WHAT A CURSE! OR, HODGES, THE BLACKSMITH.

"The doctor is a kind man," said Johnny Hodges, addressing a person of respectable appearance, who was in the act of returning to his pocket-book a physician's bill which the blacksmith did not find it convenient to pay. "The doctor is a kind man, a very kind man, and has earned his money I dare say, and I don't begrudge him a shilling of it all; but for all that I have not the means of paying his bill, nor any part of it just now."

"Well, well," said the collector, "I shall be this way before long, and will call on you again."

Johnny Hodges thanked him for the indulgence and proceeded with his work; but the hammer swung heavily upon the anvil, and many a long sigh escaped before the job in hand was fairly tumbled off.

Three or four times already the collector had paid a visit at the blacksmith's shop, who was always ready to admit the justice of the claim and that the doctor had been very kind and attentive, and had well earned his money; and though full of professions of gratitude to the good doctor, yet the doctor's bill seemed not very likely to be paid. Familiarly, said the proverb, breeds contempt. This old saw is not apt to work more roughly in any relation of life than between the creditor, or the creditor's agent, and the non-performing debtor. The pursuing party is apt to be importunate, and the pursued to grow gradually callous and indifferent. Upon the present occasion, however, the collector, who was a benevolent man, was extremely patient and forbearing. He had sufficient penetration to perceive that poor Johnny, for some cause or other, was always exceedingly mortified and pained by these repeated applications. It did not, however, escape the suspicion of the collector that there might be a certain secret cause for Johnny's inability to pay the doctor's bill. Intemperance is exhibited in a great variety of modifications. While some individuals are speedily roused into violent and disorderly action, or hushed to slumber, and reduced to the condition of a helpless and harmless mass, others, provided by nature with heads of iron and leathern skins, are equally intemperate, yet scarcely, for many years, present before the world the slightest personal indication of their habitual indulgence.

Johnny Hodges was an excellent workman, and he had abundance of work. It was not easy to account for such an appropriation of his earnings as would not leave enough for the payment of the doctor's bill, upon any other supposition than that of a wasteful and sinful employment of them for the purchase of strong drink. Johnny's countenance, to be sure, was exceedingly pale and sallow; but the pale-faced tippler is by no means an uncommon spectacle. On the other hand, Johnny was very industrious, constantly in his shop in working hours, and always busily employed.

After an interval of several weeks, the collector called again, and put the customary question, "Well, Mr. Hodges, can you pay the doctor's bill?" Perhaps there was something unusually hurried or importunate, or Johnny so thought, in the manner of making the inquiry. Johnny was engaged in turning a shoe, and he hammered it entirely out of shape. He laid down his hammer and tongs, and for a few seconds rested his cheek upon his hand.

"I don't know how I can pay the doctor's bill," said Johnny Hodges. "I've nothing here in the shop but my tools and a very little stock; and I've nothing at home but the remainder of our scanty furniture. I know the doctor's bill ought to be paid, and if he will take it, he shall be welcome to our cow, though I have five little children who live upon the milk."

"No, no, Hodges," said the collector, "you are much mistaken if you suppose the doctor, who is a Christian and a kind-hearted man, would take your cow or oppress you at all for the amount of his bill. But now is it that you, who have always so much work, have never any money?"

"Ah, sir," said Johnny Hodges, while he wiped the perspiration from his face for he was a hardworking man. "Ah, sir," said he, "what a curse it is; can nothing be done to put a stop to this intemperance? I hear a great deal of the efforts that are making; but still the gin business goes on. If it were not for the tet. stations to take strong drink I should do well enough; and the good doctor should

not have sent twice for the amount of his bill. Very few of those who write and talk so much of intemperance know anything of our trials and troubles."

"I confess," said the collector, "that I have had my suspicions and fears before. Why do you not resolve that you will never touch another drop? Go, Hodges, like a man, and put your name to the pledge, and pray God to enable you to keep it faithfully."

"Why, as to that, sir," said the blacksmith, "the pledge will do me no good; it is difficultly doesn't lie there. What a curse! Is there no prospect of putting an end to intemperance?"

"To be sure there is," replied the collector. "If people will sign the pledge, and keep it too, there is no difficulty."

"But suppose they will not sign the pledge," rejoined Johnny Hodges; "still, if gin were not so common as it is, and so easily obtained, the temptation would be taken away."

"That is all very true, but it is every man's duty to do something for himself," replied the collector. "I advise you to sign the pledge as soon as possible."

"Why, sir," said the blacksmith, "the difficulty doesn't lie here, as I told you; I signed the pledge long ago, and I have kept it well. I never was given to taking spirits in my life. My labor at the forge is pretty hard work, yet I take nothing stronger for drink than cold water."

"I am sorry that I misunderstood you," replied the collector. "But since you do not take spirits, and your children, as you have led me to suppose, are of tender years, why are you so anxious for the suppression of intemperance?"

"Because," said poor Johnny Hodges after a pause, and with evident emotion, "to tell you the plain truth it has made my home a hell, my wife a drunkard, and my children beggars. Poor things," said he, as he brushed away the tears, "they have no mother any more. The old cow that I offered you just now for the doctor's debt—and I believe it would have broken their hearts to have parted with old Brindle—is more of a mother to them now than the woman who brought them into this world of trouble. I have little to feed old Brindle with; and the children are running here and there for a little swill and such matters to keep her alive. Even the smallest of these poor things will pick up a bunch of hay or a few scattered corn-stalks, and fetch it to her, and look on with delight to see her enjoy it. I have seen them all together when their natural mother, in a drunken spree, has driven them out of doors, flying for refuge to the old cow, and lying beside her in the shed. What a curse it is!"

"What will become of them and of me," continued this broken-hearted man, "I cannot tell! I sometimes fear that I shall lose my reason and be placed in the mad house. Such is the thirst of this wretched woman for gin that she has repeatedly taken my tools and carried them five or six miles, and pawned or sold them for liquor. The day before yesterday I carried home a joint of meat for dinner. When I went home, tired and hungry, at the dinner hour, I found her drunk and asleep upon the floor. She had sold the joint of meat, and spent the money in gin. It's grievous to tell such matters to a stranger; but I can't bear that you or the good doctor should think me ungrateful any longer. I never shall forget the doctor's kindness to me two years ago, when I had my dreadful fever; and, if ever I can get so much money together, he shall certainly be paid. That fever was brought on partly by hard work, but the main-spring of the matter was in the mind. My wife was then getting very bad, and when she was in liquor, her language was both indecent and profane; though when we were married, there wasn't a more modest girl in the parish. Just before my fever came on, in one of her fits of intemperance, she strolled away, and was gone three days and three nights; and, to this hour, I have never known where she was all that time. It almost broke my heart. The doctor always said there was something upon my mind; but I never told him or any one else the cause of my trouble till now. What a curse! Don't you think, sir, that something can be done to put an end to this terrible curse of intemperance?"

"Your case is a very hard one," said the collector after a solemn pause, "and I wish I could point out a remedy; and I wish give yourself no uneasiness about the doc-

tor's bill, for I am sure he will think no more of it when I have told him your story. If it would not give you too much pain and take up too much of your time, I should like to be informed a little more particularly of the commencement and progress of this habit in your wife, which seems to have destroyed your domestic happiness."

Johnny Hodges wiped his brow and sat down upon a bench in his shop, and the collector took a seat by his side.

"Eight years ago," said Johnny Hodges, "came the first day of next month, I was married. Polly Wilson, that was her maiden name, was twenty-three, and I was four years older. I certainly thought it the best day's work I ever did, and I continued of that mind for about five years. Since then Heaven knows I have had reason to think otherwise; for, ever since, trouble has been about my path and about my bed. About three years ago my wife took to drink. I cannot tell how it happened, but she always said herself that the first drop of gin she ever drank was upon a washing day, when an old Scotch woman persuaded her that it would keep the cold off her stomach. From that time the habit grew upon her very fast. She has told me a hundred times, in her sober moments, that she would give the world to leave it off, but that she could not for the life of her. So strong has been her desire to get liquor that nothing was safe from her grasp. She has sold her children's Sabbath clothes and my own for gin. After I had gotten well of my fever I worked hard; and, at one time, had laid by nearly enough, as I supposed, to pay the doctor's bill. One day I had received a crown for work, and went to my drawer to add it to the rest; and—all was gone! The drawer had been forced open. She knew that I had been saving the money to pay the doctor and the apothecary for their services during my fever; she knew that my sickness had been produced by sleepless nights and a broken heart, on her account. Yet she could not resist the temptation. She affirmed, in the most solemn manner, that she knew nothing about it; but two of the little children, in answer to my inquiry, told me that they had seen mammy break open the drawer and take out the money, and that she went directly over to the grocery, and in about half an hour after she returned, went to sleep so soundly in her chair that they could not wake her up to get them a little supper. At that time I went to Mr. Calvin Leech, the grocer, and told him that I wondered, as he was a church member, how he could have the heart to ruin the peace of my family. He was very harsh, and told me that every man must take care of his own wife, and that it was not his business to look after mine. I began to think, with Joe, that I would not live always. Strange fancies came into my head about that time, and I tried hard to think of some escape from such a world of sin and sorrow, but a kind and merciful God would not let me take my own wild way. I read my Bible; and the poor children kept all the while in my way, smiling sweetly in my face, and driving all evil thoughts from my mind. My eldest boy was then about seven. 'Don't take on so, daddy,' the little fellow used to say, when he found me shedding tears, 'don't cry, daddy; I shall be big enough to blow the bellows next year.' I have tried to keep up for the sake of these poor children; and few would be better for their years if their mother did not teach some of them to curse and swear. They have the same bright look and gentle temper that my wife had when we were married. There never was a milder temper than Polly's before this curse fell upon the poor creature. Oh, sir, it is nothing but gin that has ruined our hopes of happiness in this world. How strange it is that nothing can be done to stay such a dreadful plague!"

The collector shook the poor blacksmith by the hand, and bade him keep up his spirits as well as he could, and put his trust in God's providence. Promising to make a friendly call, in the course of a few days, he took his leave.

This interview with the blacksmith had caused him to contemplate the subject of the temperance reform somewhat in a novel point of view. The important and frequently repeated interrogatory of Johnny Hodges, "Cannot something be done to put an end to the evils of intemperance?" to most individuals would appear to savor of gross ignorance in the inquirer as to these amazing efforts which have already been

made, at home and abroad. But it must not be forgotten that poor Hodges was no theorizer in that department of domestic wretchedness which arises from intemperance. He was well aware that a prodigious effort had been made for the purification of the world, by voluntary associations adopting the pledge of total abstinence. He perfectly understood that all those who had subscribed such a pledge, and faithfully adhered to it, were safe from the effects of intemperance in their own persons. Yet this poor fellow cried aloud, out of the depths of his real misery, "Cannot something be done to put an end to the evils of intemperance?"

His own bitter experience had taught him that there was one person who could never be prevailed upon to sign the pledge; one, upon whose faithful execution of her domestic duties his whole earthly happiness depended—the partner of his bosom, the mother of his children, and she had become a loathsome and ungovernable drunkard. He rationally inferred, indeed, he well knew, from his own observation upon the surrounding neighborhood, that such an occurrence was not uncommon. Intemperate husbands, intemperate wives, and intemperate children were all around him. Johnny Hodges was a man of good common sense. He reasoned forward to the future from the past. He entertained no doubt that, notwithstanding the most energetic, voluntary efforts of all the societies upon the face of the earth, drunkenness would certainly continue in a greater or less degree, so long as the means of drunkenness were suffered to remain. The process of reasoning in Johnny's mind may be very easily described. So long, thought he, as gin-selling continues to be sanctioned by law, and gin palaces are legalized at every corner; so long as church members distil spirituous liquor, and sell it, reducing the temperate drinker's crown to the drunkard's ninnycap, and a good winning away the bread from the miserable tippler's children, and causing the husband and wife to hate and abhor the very presence of each other; so long a very considerable number of persons, who will not sign the pledge, will be annually converted from temperate men and women into drunken vagabonds and paupers. The question is therefore reduced to this: Can no effectual measure be provided by law to prevent a cold, calculating mercenary body of men from trafficking any longer in broken hopes, broken hearts, and broken constitutions; and to restrain at least such as are church members, who pray to the Lord not to lead them into temptation, from laying snares along the highways and hedges of the land to entrap the feet of their fellow-creatures, and tempt their weaker brethren to their ruin?

A month or more passed away before the collector's business brought him again into the neighborhood of the blacksmith's shop. Johnny Hodges was at work as usual. He appeared dejected and careworn. His visitor shook him by the hand, and told him that the doctor said he should consider him, as old Boerhaave used to say, one of his best patients, for God would be his paymaster. "Never think of the debt any more, Johnny," said the collector. "The doctor has sent you his bill receipted, and he bade me tell you that if a little money would help you in your trouble you should be heartily welcome to it."

"Indeed," said the blacksmith, "the doctor is a kind friend; but I suppose nothing can be done to put an end to this curse!"

"I fear there will not be, at present," said the collector; "drink is the idol of the people. The friends of temperance have petitioned the legislature to pull their old idol down. Now there are in that very body a great many members who love the idol dearly; there are many who are sent thither expressly to keep the idol up. So you see that petitioning the legislature, such as it now is, to abolish the traffic in drink is like petitioning the priests of Baal to pull down their false god. But you look pale and sad. Has any new trouble come upon you, or do you find the old one more grievous to bear?"

"Ah, sir," said the man of many woes, "we have had trouble enough, new and old

"I have learned since the preparation of this tale, from the collector himself, that Hodges expressed the liveliest gratitude for the doctor's kindness in relinquishing his claim for professional services, but that he persisted in refusing to receive the money which accompanied the receipted bill. "I had reward the doctor for all his kindness," said the poor fellow, "but I cannot take the money."