

Tales and Sketches.

THE BURNISH FAMILY.

A PRIZE STORY PUBLISHED BY THE SCOTTISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE.

CHAPTER XII.

The Uninvited Guest.

"The soul, all 'rest of heavenly mark,
Defaced God's image there,
Rolls down and down yon abyss dark,
To thy howling home, Despair!"

—William Thom.

There was an evening party in Portland Place, and Mabel's gifts and acquirements as a singer had been put in requisition to add to the entertainment of the night. So she, at Mrs. Burnish's particular request, left her seclusion in the Schoolroom, to join the guests in the drawing room, feeling, it must be owned, saddened by recent events, nay, wholly out of spirits, and a little constrained also by the consciousness, felt in company for the first time, that she did not mingle on equal terms with the visitors. However, to give innocent pleasure to others, even if it cost some personal sacrifice, was worth the effort. Mabel knew it to be among the minor morals that make so much of the happiness of life. So she strove to aid Mrs. Burnish, and succeeded. Her influence was felt, though not much seen. She was ready to play accompaniments for singers far inferior to herself, and she had the exquisite taste that speedily adjusts an accompaniment to the requirements or defects of a voice, so as to bring out merits and make up deficiencies. She sung a second to help the timid, and in every way, like a neutral tint in a painting, contrived to throw out other colors into fuller beauty. Mrs. Burnish was manifestly pleased. Parties fatigued her greatly, and she was delighted that Mabel could be so useful, and yet so unobtrusive in helping to entertain her guests.

Never was Mr. Burnish in better spirits. His cares as a member of Parliament, the various affairs so pressing on his attention, some recent feeling of indisposition, all passed away as he stood among his friends. His cordial attention to the elders, his cheerful complacency to the young, the pleasant word and beaming smile falling like sunshine all around were all such, that Mabel thought she never had seen a more courteous host and kindly gentleman. But somehow the Penitentiary, the Accident Ward, the misery seething and simmering below the upper surface of society, and that contributed—yes, it should not be denied, contributed—to produce the wealth and luxury spread around;—this thought made Mabel's efforts of that night, work, and hard work. Delamere, too, was there, but he was grave and abstracted. Shafton Keen mingled among the guests; but though his caustic tongue was silent, his look, whenever he passed Mabel, reminded her of the sad scene in which they had so recently met.

As the night wore away, speeded by the voice of song and the light laughter of youth, the rooms became very full. It was the party of the season in the Burnish house; and Mrs. Burnish, to each group of guests, was giving her version of the narrow escape her dear Emily and Kate had recently had; and Mr. Veering was in a quiet corner, with a knot of admirers, telling them the marvels of benevolence of his patron, and how, "though he would not boast, forbid it that he should, he had been the humble instrument of suggesting this and that improvement!" Mabel, not sorry to escape from further effort and notice, was seated in the recess of a window, near the sofa where Mrs. Burnish, claiming an invalid's privilege, reclined, and exchanged pleasant chat with particular friends, pleased that all seemed going on agreeably. While Mabel looked on all this harmonious scene, a side-door, half concealed by a stand of flowers, opened, and a form only partially visible, glided in. At first it occurred to Mabel that it was one of the servants, who required to attend to the lights, and wished to escape observation, but in a few seconds, she felt assured it was none of the servants of the house. Then, as her hand was raised to touch Mrs. Burnish's arm, and direct her attention, it occurred to her that it was some piece of pleasantries among the guests, though she thought it ill-timed and eccentric. What was her amazement to see the form emerge among the brilliant throng, and to recognize the wasted frame, the threadbare garb, the grey hair and haggard face of Mrs. Burnish's unfortunate brother! His countenance had impressed her from the first moment that she beheld it. The regularity of the prominent features only made them more gaunt in their emaciation; but now, what was it new in that dark visage that so appalled her? She saw in an instant that the link which, as much as life itself, binds man to its kind, was broken. Reason had fled. Not exactly comprehending what to do, but with a vague perception that Mrs. Burnish must be saved from the shock of seeing her brother, Mabel, passing round, came in front of the sofa where, all unconscious of the accession to her company, Mrs. Burnish was discussing with a showy matron the proposed costume of the bridesmaids at a wedding fixed for the next week. Mabel contrived to stand before her and interrupt the view of a part of the room.

A gentleman was conducting a laughing girl to the piano, and a group of sisters were following the pair, not knowing that behind them, like the shadow of evil tracking their steps, glided the dark form that Mabel watched. They were crossing the spacious room, and had reached the centre, when one of the number looked behind towards the couch where her mother and Mrs. Burnish sat. She encountered, as she turned her head, close to her shoulder the apparition of wild eyes and cadaverous features, staring full at her, yet seeming not to see her. A startled cry of fright, and a run towards her mother, brought up every head, and a hush fell instantly on the glittering crowd. Mr. Burnish, with his elbow on the corner of the mantel-shelf, was in pleasant conversation with a friend, when he heard the cry, and stepped forward, raising his glass to his eye, and saw in the middle of the room, under the brilliant glass chandelier—amid the light, and heat, and flowers, and splendid colors of that gorgeous room—one who looked the personification of winter—withered, bony, grey, palpably shivering with cold. "Midsummer is scarcely the time for charade or masks," said the astonished host, a touch of displeasure, in his courteous voice, which, as he drew nearer, changed to a tone of alarm. "Oh me. Heavens! what is this? Man! maniac! who are you? Here Shiff'kins, Charles—rascals, what are you doing? Your pardon, friends—a moment will set this right." Immoveable, except for the shivering which shook every limb, the intruder kept his standing, his lean forefinger lifted, and said with a tremulous voice, feeble as infancy, yet heard distinctly in the awed attention of that room—"Brether! I'm come to ask you about—about—I half forget. Yes! that's it—about the good Samaritan. Oh, I'm wounded and bruised, dear brother! crushed under dreadful wheels."

"This is frightful! Horrible!" said a voice near. Meanwhile, in far less time than it has taken to describe it, Mrs. Burnish heard the shriek and saw the palpitating girl who had raised it, throw herself into her mother's arms, while her friends, silent and tremulous closed round the sofa. Mabel, who had seen the whole was, as we have said, so standing as to screen the scene from Mrs. Burnish.

"What is it? What has fallen? Stand aside my dears. Miss Alterton you are quite before me." "Dear Mrs. Burnish," said Mabel, turning and clasping her arms round her, "sit still a few minutes;" but from under Mabel's arm she caught a glimpse of Mr. Burnish, pale and agitated, in the centre of the room confronting some one; and panic-stricken, with the strength of a convulsion, she twisted from the clasp that encircled her and sprang towards her husband, just as the maniac, with a world of anguish in misfaltering tones, was describing his condition.

"Oh, Edward! Oh, my brother!—my poor dear brother! What's this? Oh! don't look so," were the hysterical cries of Mrs. Burnish, as she recognized the cause of the disturbance, and noticed the unmistakable glare of madness in his eyes.

Shafton Keen, Delamere, and Mabel, were in a moment by her side, and supported her as she was falling. Mr. Burnish, by the very extent of the confusion, was roused to composure. "Miss Alterton," he said, "get her to her room; you have sense and firmness, exert them and compose her." Then turning to his guests who were already, many of them, rushing down stairs in the panic caused by a madman having got among them, he uttered an apology—alluding to the relationship, which, as Mrs. Burnish had revealed it, was necessary, and said something about "the unhappy state of mind of the intruder." By this time the servants had mustered in force and came to their master, all declaring they did not know how the madman had got in—"certainly the hall door was open."

"Attend the company in their departure," said he sternly; "see that you do not neglect them;" and with the help of Shafton he prepared to lead the maniac from the room, but there was a latent strength in that attenuated frame which madness roused to spasmodic force. He threw off the grasp of those who held him as if they were children—babbling meanwhile like an infant—a thread of meaning running through his perplexed words,—"You are the thieves. You plunder the helpless traveller—you rend him, and tear his veins, and strip him, and put fire in his brain—yes, fire, and take his gold, and leave him half dead. Oh! that's cruel, that's hellish! kill him at once, not piecemeal." Then he would repeat his inquiry for aid—shiver and say, "I shall die before the good Samaritan comes."

To keep Mrs. Burnish in her room when she was got there, was as next to impossible as to remove the maniac, who, the instant he was touched, hurled every one off as assailants. Medical aid was sent for as soon as the house was cleared; and Shafton Keen directed a room on the basement floor to be instantly prepared, and entreated Mr. Burnish, to whose corpulency agitation of any kind was dangerous, to withdraw, and leave it to the doctors, who were summoned, and the servants, to do the best they could with the poor wreck before them.

A dismal night was that to every one in the house. A sense of injury, we have seen, rankled in Mrs. Burnish's heart with regard to the treatment her brother had received from her husband. A feeling of humiliation and resentment at this scene was bitterly concentrated in the mind of Mr. Burnish. His regard for his wife took that form of half pity which is allied to contempt, and the shipwreck her brother had made blended displeasure with that feeling. He and his father before him, his brothers and