

The Eastroyds and the Murwoods

BY SARAH SELINA HAMER, IN THE 'ALLIANCE NEWS.'

Chapter III.—Continued. Two Catastrophes.

'Where's my husband? What's become of Bob? He's never been home all night,' she cried, addressing both indiscriminately.

'Not been home!' exclaimed the manager. 'Why, how is that I wonder, Mrs. Robson? for the newcomer was the wife of the man after whom he had just been inquiring. 'He is not here,' he added.

'Why, whatever's become on him? Oh, dear, dear!' cried his wife, in still more frightened tones. 'I couldn't come with him to t' stir, because my mother's ill, an' I had to go on an' stop wi' her all t' night; an' I took t' children, too, up to t' Lumb. An' when I come back a bit sin' I fun' out at Bob had niver been i' bed, nor i' t' house at all. Iverythin' were just as I'd left it. Oh, dear a me! Somethin's happened to him; it must ba'e done.'

The two men looked at one another in some consternation.

'I can't make it out,' wailed the woman, beginning to cry. 'It isn't as if he could ha'e had drink, for he towld me there was to be none. Besides, he hasn't touched a glass o' anythin' for above a fortnit, an' he towld me only yesterday as he meant to sign teetotal.'

Whilst she was speaking Ernest Eastroyd arrived. He only heard the last sentence.

'I am very sorry that Robson was overcome again yesterday,' he said; 'and we will hope it will be the last time. I suppose he is not fit to come to his work this morning, and you have come to make excuse for him.'

'It is worse than that,' said the manager gravely, and he drew Ernest aside, and explained matters.

'Men must be sent to seek for him at once,' said the latter, greatly concerned on hearing such ill news. 'Do you know which way Robson started for home?' he asked, turning to Earnshaw.

'T' top road,' said the man. 'He said, as he were as far up t' hill as t' house, it 'ould be his nearest way. He left at t' same time as I did, about hafe past eleven.'

The manager and the young master exchanged looks; the same idea had occurred to both. Bob Robson would, by the higher road, have to pass along the top of 'Grimshaw's Quarry.' What if, intoxicated as he was—? Still, it was fenced by a stone wall, from the footpath.

Like one dazed with her anxiety and grief, Mrs. Robson, accepting Ernest's invitation, followed him into Mr. Lord's office, when the manager and others had hurriedly left the precincts of the mill. As she took the chair which the young master drew up to the fire for her she again broke into speech, troubled, bewildered, questioning.

'Did I understand yo' to say, Mester Ernest, Sir, as my master' (a common name for 'husband' in the manufacturing districts of the North) 'got for'a'd (drunk) last night? Oh, sir, yo' surely didn't gie to t' men what yo'n gan up takin' yo'rsel'! An' I had sich hopes on him,' the poor woman wailed, rocking herself to and fro in her distress.

'You may be sure that I did nothing of the kind, Mrs. Robson,' said the young man, whose distress almost equalled hers. 'I could not, I hope, be so inconsistent. But as you know, I daresay, my brothers do not share my views, and having a mistaken idea that no festivity is complete without intoxicants, they invited a few of the head men up to the house—Robson amongst them—quite unknown to me. And they had all had too much, I regret to say, before I found it out. I was specially sorry about your husband, because I had great hopes myself that he was going to abstain altogether. Indeed, Mrs. Robson, you must not give way to fear. Probably he has fallen and hurt himself; and very likely this lapse and its consequences

will be a lesson to him. Let us hope for the best.'

'But if he's been out all t' night en be starved to t' death,' cried the poor woman. Then, springing to her feet, she went on: 'I cannot stop here, Mester Ernest; I cannot, for sure. I mun go a seechin' him.'

'The roads are very wet, and the wind still blows, though it has abated a little; and I have given orders that one of the men is to bring word, without a minute's delay, as soon as ever it is found out what has happened. We shall soon know now. You had better stop here. Meantime I will send up to the house for a carriage to take you home; you are in no state to walk. Do sit down again, Mrs. Robson,' entreated Ernest, 'and I will send for your sister out of the mill to come to you.'

He knew that a certain Ann Hopkinson was Robson's sister-in-law. Leaving the two women together, after Ann's arrival, Ernest went into the private office to open the letters. Neither of his brothers had yet come. Probably they were sleeping off the effects of their debauch. This truly was a nice beginning of work after a holiday. And all owing to the drink!

But as far as himself was concerned this was only a passing thought. That poor woman in the other office, and what awaited her, was the trouble, for that something very serious had happened could not be doubted. Nor had he long to wait for confirmation of this. A few minutes afterwards, lifting his eyes from a letter he was reading, Ernest saw a man running across the mill yard towards the office. He hurried out to meet him.

'We'n found him, Mester Ernest,' said the messenger; 'but it's all o'er wi' Robson, poor chap! He were lyin' at t' bottom o' t' quarry, wi' most o' his bones broke, I should think.'

'I feared that,' said Ernest, white to the lips. 'Still there is a wall above it.'

'A piece on it has been blown down i' t' gale, seemingly,' said the man. 'There's ever such a long gap. An' i' t' dark Bob niver noticed it, I reckon; an' some o' t' chaps were sayin' as he'd had some drink, too.'

'Ah, therein lay the mischief,' thought Ernest, for it had not been a very dark night. The clouds had been too much broken for that. 'What have you done with the poor fellow?' he asked, in a choked voice.

'We took a stretcher wi' us, as yo' towld us; an' t' others has set off home wi' him, except Earnshaw; he's gone on for Dr. Hasleham. T' manager sent him, though it's not a bit o' use.'

Just then the brougham Ernest had ordered was seen coming down the drive from the house, and sick at heart he turned and entered the office, where he had left the two women.

We will not further harrow the feelings of our readers, nowever, by a detailed account of the breaking of the sad news to Robson's wife. Suffice it to say that her distress was terrible to witness, and that it was some time before, prostrate with grief, she was able to be led to the carriage. Her sister went with her, of course, with orders to remain as long as she was required, with no loss as to wages. The man who had brought the tidings rode down also with the coachman on the box, carrying a message to the manager to see to everything for the poor widow.

'Practically, Edward and Tom are responsible for this,' said Ernest to himself, as with inexpressible sorrow of heart and bitterness of spirit he returned to the office. Only to think that the wedding festivities of himself and Kate should have such an ending!

The carriage was not very long away. Ernest saw it turn in at the gates on the hill-side, and at the same moment there was a knock at the office door.

'Come in,' said Ernest, whereupon there entered Earnshaw.

'I rode up on t' carriage,' said the man. 'Mester Lord said as how I'd better do so, an' come an' tell yo' as he thowt there was somethin' sariously wrong up at West Moor, because when I went to fetch t' doctor they towld me as he'd been sent for there in a great hurry, about an hour sin'. This is a bad job about Robson, isn't it?' added Earnshaw, after a pause.

'It's a very sad business indeed,' said Ernest, gravely. 'Run and bring back the carriage, Earnshaw,' he continued. 'I must drive up to West Moor, and see what is the matter there.' 'What new trouble looms ahead now?' he asked himself, as he stepped into it a few minutes afterwards.

It was quite a twenty minutes' drive from Eastroyden to West Moor House, for you had to descend the valley some distance, skirt Clapperton, and mount a steep hill to gain the moor.

On reaching his destination Ernest saw two conveyances standing before the gate, the doctor's gig, and his own phaeton. Kate had already come then, it seemed. She had said she should go and see how Maurice was during the morning.

'Missis has just come, sir, not five minutes since,' said the man, touching his hat as Ernest sprang out of the brougham. 'Bad job, this, sir; very sorry, sir,' he added.

'What's a bad job, Hartley?' asked Ernest, almost irritably.

'About Master Maurice, sir. I thought perhaps they'd sent you word. One o' t' servants has been out a bit since, t' doctor's man says, and she do say he is dyin'. Do all they can, they can't bring him round. Such a fine little gentleman as he was, sir.'

Hartley was an old family servant of the Eastroyds, though he had only just become Ernest's coachman. Ernest hurried up to the door, opened it himself, and entered the hall. It was large, oak-panelled, and luxuriously furnished. Coming down the softly-carpeted stairs, with bowed head and slow step, he saw Dr. Hasleham. At the bottom of the staircase the two men met, and clasped hands. Ernest was startled when he looked into his friend's face.

'Arthur, whatever is it? Is Maurice—?'

Dr. Hasleham put his arm within Ernest's, and drew him into the library. Just as he shut the door sounds of distress penetrated to their ears, sounds as of someone wildly weeping and exclaiming.

'Yes, Maurice is dead,' said the former. 'It was impossible to save him,' and the young doctor spoke as if grieved to the heart.

'You had no idea last night that he was so ill,' said Ernest, puzzled by Arthur's manner and appearance; 'and his death has come as a shock to you? Poor Ellen! And how does she bear it?' he added.

'Poor Ellen, indeed!' said the doctor, both sorrowfully and bitterly. 'Ernest,' he went on, flinging himself into a chair, and half burying his face in his hands, 'I may as well tell you, for you will have to know. The poor child has not died of his disorder—he would doubtless have got over that—but by "misadventure," as the coroner's jury will bring it in. Such things have occurred, of course, where drink has had nothing whatever to do with it; but in this case there is no doubt whatever that your poor sister was under its influence when she—'

Here Arthur stopped, as if unwilling or unable to proceed.

'What did she do?' asked Ernest, hoarsely.

'Gave the child, instead of his medicine, some of the lotion her husband had for his leg two or three weeks ago, though it was labelled "poison."'

'Good God!' exclaimed Ernest. 'How terrible! It is enough to break her heart, and Matthew's too.'

'We can only hope and pray that this may prove a turning point for her,' said Arthur solemnly. 'For the moment, of course, she will be tempted to have recourse to stimulants to drown her anguish. But she must not be left a minute. When your wife goes home—she is with her now—Lucy must come. This is a sad coming home for you, Ernest, my friend,' he added, rising.

'And the accursed drink at the very root of it,' said the other, bitterly. 'And you don't know all yet, Arthur,' he added.

(To be continued.)