

THE RED, RED WINE:

A TEMPERANCE STORY.

THE REV. J. JACKSON WRAY'S LAST STORY.

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CHAPTER IX.

When Reuben Stanford, the 'handsome Vet.,' was removed from the 'Netherborough Arms' to his own lodgings on the night of the great banquet, he was all but helpless with drink, excitement, and the sore handling he had brought upon himself in the scuffle that followed his rude and unseasonable 'boast.' The next day he could not leave his bed. Had he even been able, he would not for very shame's sake. His whole system, physical, mental, moral, was taking vengeance on him for yester-night's sin and folly. His head was dull and stupid, and ached so that he felt scarcely sane. His mind and memory were in a daze, and the more he struggled to realize the miserable facts, the more he called himself a coward and a fool.

He vainly tried to take the cup of tea and the slice of dry toast his landlady had supplied him with. Without his knowledge she sent for the doctor, perfectly persuaded in her own mind that her lodger was seriously ill. Had Dr. Marcus Medway been his usual medical attendant, Mrs. Crouch would never have summoned him unless under orders so to do. That notable, or rather, notorious, individual would most certainly have prescribed for him 'a hair of the dog that bit him'—a strange fashion, surely, of treating the rabies of strong drink!

Dr. Julius Preston, a young and clever surgeon, who had, but lately taken up his abode in Netherborough, was a man of another spirit. He ordered his patient to bed, put an absolute embargo on alcohol in any form, and gave him to understand that he might be up and about in a day or two if he would do as he was told.

Reuben Stanford was not submissive. He was a refractory patient, and so it came to pass that on the day of the school feast he was 'not at all himself,' to quote his own way of putting it. As he was paying scant attention to the late breakfast Mrs. Crouch had prepared for him, a special messenger came to summon him to Horton Hall. Squire Langley's favorite riding mare had met with an accident, and the presence of the Vet. was instantly required.

'You surely don't think of going, sir, do you?' said his landlady, a motherly body, for whom he had much regard.

'I must go,' he said, beginning at once to attire himself for his journey.

Scarcely had she left the room, fully aware that further entreaty would be vain, than Stanford helped himself to a 'stiffish' glass of brandy and soda, a prescription which he had found useful when he had been 'all to pieces,' as he called it, after special indulgence. He knew that it would 'pull him together,' and bring him up to his normal level for a while. Without pause he swallowed the 'ruinous restorer,' and soon felt himself to be 'quite another man.'

As he paused in the hall to put on his spurs, Mrs. Crouch again appeared, and noting that his hand shook as he buckled the spur-straps to his heel, ventured one more remonstrance.

'Mr. Stanford,' said she, 'I'm sure you ought not to go. Dr. Preston wouldn't let you, if he knew.'

'Dr. Preston couldn't help himself any more than I can,'—then noticing her really anxious face, he continued, 'Don't trouble, Mrs. Crouch. There's no help for it, and, indeed, I feel that a smart ride will do me good. Squire Langley is far too valuable a patron for a young man like me to lose. I'm all right; and if I wasn't,' he continued, with a laugh that had no ring in it, 'needs must, you know, when Old Somebody drives.'

'Old Somebody, as you call him,' said candid Mrs. Crouch, 'hasn't any need to drive you, Mr. Stanford. You gallop his way on your own accord. O, sir! when will you stop?'

'When I get there, I suppose,' he said, half angrily, half despairingly, and turning on his heel repaired to the 'Griffin,' where his horse was stabled. He paused at the door, however, to fling back a kindly look at his anxious landlady, for he had ever a kindly heart. That look became a treasured memory for many and many a day.

In the yard of the 'Griffin' Inn, Reuben Stanford's beautiful black mare stood pawing the ground restlessly, and requiring all the firmness of the ostler's hand to hold it in. Reuben was proud of his steed, and well he might be, for Dark Lady, as he called her, was quite a local celebrity, not only for the uncommon beauty of her form and gait, but for her remarkable powers of speed. There was ever a good understanding between the mare and her master, and it would be hard to say which of them loved the other best.

'Good morning, Marcell,' said Reuben to the landlord, who came out to give him greeting. 'Dark Lady seems rather lively this morning.'

'Why, yes, and small wonder. She hasn't been out of the yard for some days. What's been wrong wi' you?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Reuben, in a tone that implied disgust with the whole subject. 'Seedy, I suppose. I've been confounded queer. Just come and alter this curb for me, my hand shakes.'

'O, we'll soon put all that right,' said Marcell. 'Your nerves just want steadying a bit. You haven't got over the banquet yet, I expect. Ha, ha, ha.'

'Yes, that's about the truth of it,' said Stanford, too vexed with himself to laugh. 'I wish I had been a hundred miles away,' and so saying he threw himself into the saddle with that sort of action that seems designed to come a reckless cropper on the other side. Of all the miseries that ever ask the question, 'Is life worth living?' I think a toper with a conscience after a hard bout of drinking is the man who is most warranted in saying 'No!'

'Stop a minute,' said Marcell, and hastening into the house, he speedily returned with a glass of liquor in his hand.

'Here, Stanford,' said he, 'here's a drop of "special" for you. It's seven years old if it's a day. It's as mild as milk. There's not a headache in a hog's head of it. Drink it off. It'll do you good!'

'It'll do you good.' Take it for all in all, this is probably the most popular lie that the higher civilization, aided by the religion of goodwill to man, as commonly interpreted, has ever yet produced. From the burglar o' nights who proffers a jorum of gin to a 'brother knight of the jimmy, with a big swear to recommend it, to the pious host who proffers a glass of 'red, red wine' to the minister who has just returned from service, and is supposed to need a pick-me-up, 'It'll do you good' is the favorite lie of the classes and the masses in this land of ours. It is the only quack medicine in the world where the doctor and the patient take the physic together, look each other in the face benevolently, and say, 'Your health!'

The handsome animal that Stanford bestrode, as if glad to feel her master's weight, and eager for a scamper, arched her graceful neck, champed her bit, and pawed the ground, longing to be off and away. The ride did Reuben good. He felt better as the milestones passed. As Dark Lady cantered with him over the springy turf, and under the shady elms, and over the undulating slopes of Horton Park; as the music of the birds, and the hum of the bees among the limes, and the pleasant ripple of the beck fell upon his ears; as he bared his head that the balmy summer wind might work in its will among his curly locks, and breathe its grateful incense on his brow; as all the glad possibilities of youth, and strength, and life, crown-

ed with the love of a true woman, rose before him in present vision, the question, 'Is life worth living?' resolved itself into a grand impertinence, the ruling pessimism of a fool. The blood was warm in his veins, the light was bright in his eye, and the exuberant spirit within him found vent in song.

CHAPTER X.

Squire Langley was a man with a hobby, and his hobby was horses and dogs. When matters went well with them, those about him could get on very well with him. If, as on the present occasion, harm should come to any of his four-footed favorites, he raged around like the proverbial bear with the sore head.

'What's amiss, squire?' said Reuben, as he handed the reins of Dark Lady to the groom who was waiting to take charge of her. Squire Langley was striding across the stable-yard; he always did stride when he was in a temper, and always, as now, carried his thick ivory-handled cane on his shoulder, as if it were a spade or a pitch-fork. Whenever it was so hoisted, those who knew him best took care to keep well out of his reach.

'Amis?' growled the squire. 'Why, that two-legged ass of mine, Ralph Fenwick, 's thrown my riding mare down the bank by Jingleton Gate, and lamed her for life, and spoiled her beauty into the bargain. The confounded idiot.'

'What, Creole?' said Reuben, sympathetically, for he knew the horse and its value. 'What a pity! How did it happen?'

By this time they were at the door of the 'loose-box,' in which the injured animal had been placed.

'Happen!' roared the Squire, flinging wide the door as though he would like to fling it at the head of the offending Fenwick. 'Why, as most accidents of that kind do happen—in these parts at any rate. I gave the fellows a barrel of treble X to drink the health of the new railway—the sodden idiots have been bewitched ever since. I've stopped the tap, but it seems they've turned another on somewhere else. The only comfort I have is that Fenwick is mauled as bad as the mare. He's gotten a face with as many lines and colors on it as there is on a country map, and he won't be able to see out of one of his eyes for a month of Sundays. Serves him right. Now then, mare! Wo, my pet! There, Stanford, what do you think of a sight like that?'

Creole certainly was a pitiful sight to see. Her beautiful hide was filled with dust, and clothed here and there with the mire of the ditch into which she had fallen. It appeared that the squire had seen the mare crawling in limping fashion along the park road, and led by Fenwick, whose zeal on the 'health' of the new railway had lost him his wits. No sooner did that hapless lover of strong beer catch sight of the burly squire striding across the park in his seven-leagued boots, with his cane ominously hoisted to his shoulder, than he took to his heels and ran as if for dear life, leaving the mare behind him. Creole would not allow anyone but Fenwick to handle her, and so the squire would not have her meddled with until the 'vet.' came.

Reuben Stanford, like every man that is a man, had a kindly sympathy for dumb animals, and what is far less usual, had the faculty of almost instant fascination. A few quiet words, a gentle touch, and a little gentle stroking of the nostrils, were sufficient to win from the trembling mare a little whinny of content, and the 'handsome vet.' had her completely at his will. With his own hands he tenderly and carefully washed and smoothed her ruffled coat. Then he set himself to find the seat of injury, that which made the horse dead lame; and all the while the squire