

HOUSEHOLD.

Two Women.

(Julia Hughes Persing, in the 'Union Signal.')

Don't talk to me of love and mercy and justice! Why was my boy taken in his purity and innocence, while scores of dissolute young men are left? Explain that, and perhaps I can believe there is equity in the laws of heaven.'

The voice was low and cultured, and a tense, passionate tone vibrated in each word, showing the utter rebellion of a human soul.

The minister rose quietly. He felt the uselessness of more words than. He extended his hand, saying, in a wonderfully gentle tone, 'At least, believe how deep is my sympathy for you in your sorrow, Mrs. Bruce. Good-by.'

She took the proffered hand in silence. There was not a tear in the dumb, suffering eyes.

The minister passed thoughtfully down the oaken staircase. The door to the front parlor was open. A maid was bearing in a massive wreath of flowers. Beyond her he caught a glimpse of the white casket, almost covered with costly floral offerings. Yes, it was oh, so hard. What if it had been his own son, his bright, handsome boy! The bare thought made him shudder. After all, it made a great difference as to whose son it was that lay in there, so still, among the flowers. Was it to be wondered at that Mrs. Bruce's faith, never very strong, should fail her at such a sudden, fearful test?

Through the beautiful burial service on the morrow, Mrs. Bruce's rebellion deepened. Not a tear dimmed the hardness of her eyes, not a sob broke the settled weight on her heart. Her husband and two manly sons were near her, trying to comfort by their living presence. Her eyes sought only the marble face among the flowers, and her heart repeated again and again its rebellious moanings: God was cruel; He was not love; there could be no love in heaven if such things were allowed.

And the minister, glancing round at the beautiful home, with its signs of wealth, culture and refinement, then at the noble father and sons and down at the still beautiful face of perfect childhood, felt his heart ache for this family, in its sudden sorrow, and especially for the mother, whose faith was trembling in the balance. He poured out his soul in

prayer, pleading for the presence of the God of comfort, of the Saviour, who Himself had suffered and sorrowed. The father and sons wept tears of relief over the soothing consolation of that personal prayer; but the mother sat stern and silent, her eyes dull and tearless.

The spring came in, with its warm sunshine, thawing out the frosts of winter. But nothing seemed to melt the ice around Mrs. Bruce's heart and life. It was for her 'baby lad' that her heart yearned. He had come into her home after years of silence, in which there had been no prattle of baby tongue. Perhaps this was why the mother-heart loved him most, why they all so fondly cherished him. For six brief, happy years he had been their idol. Then, without a moment's warning, he had been snatched from them.

'Had it been his own fault, or the fault of any one of us—but a falling brick! No fault of anyone—simply chance. Why should it have fallen just at that moment. Why need my darling have been in just that particular spot? Why did it all happen?' Over and over again came the poor mother's questionings until they bred a skepticism born of fear and sorrow. There was no reason in it; there was no justice; no overruling God who loved the world. It was all chance—chance.

There came to her room one day one whom she slightly knew; a woman who wore a mask of smiles on her proud face, and a living, eating sorrow in her heart. To-day the mask was thrown aside, and the living sorrow of the one woman's life looked straight and full into the dead sorrow of the other, and surprised and awed, Mrs. Bruce was silent. What strange power was it which made her draw back and tremble at the daring of her proud rebellion?

'Your child might have become what my son is to-day,' at last said the visitor, in a quiet tone.

'O, no; never,' cried Mrs. Bruce, aroused from her apathy. 'My Louis would never have been like your Henry. Look at my other sons,' drawing herself up proudly and haughtily. 'To say my boy might have been like yours is no comfort to me.'

'Nevertheless, it is true. Listen, my friend. I saw your boy once with his fair face and golden curls. But my boy's face was fairer, his curls more wonderfully golden. When I look into his bloated face now and into the bleared eyes that are almost always blood-shot, I wonder that the face could ever have been so fair and soft and smooth, and the eyes so wondrously blue that the sky seemed reflected in them. There is no assurance

for you under God's heaven that your fair boy would not have become just such a drunkard as mine, so long as the snares of Satan infest the earth to entrap the unwary feet.

'He was so beautiful a child,' went on the voice, but softer now. 'People used to turn to look at him. I did not know I loved him better than I loved God. One day he fell ill. The doctors said he could not live. Then I was wild and raved. I could not, would not have it so. Finally I prayed, if you could call such selfish pleadings prayer. I begged God to take anything, everything else from me but spare me my boy. And my wish was granted; my boy spared. I have him yet—a living curse—God's punishment to me.'

'You point with pride to your two sons,' relentlessly continued the earnest woman. 'Don't do it again. I, too, have a noble son, many years older than this one, and as noble a man as any mother could wish to claim. Don't think that your older sons prove what your youngest might have been, for I tell you solemnly you do not know what he might have become. Looking back over years of shame and sorrow, over such awful anguish as only the mother of a hopeless drunkard can know, I pray you to cease your murmurings. Never again utter a word against God's justice, nor against His mercy and love. Rather, get down on your knees and thank Him that in His wondrous love and mercy He took your darling just when He did; that in your home this night is no hopeless shadow of unending misery; in your ears no raving of a drink-crazed son; on your heart no weight of crushing anguish which nothing, nothing, is ever able to lift or ease.'

'O God!' the voice was now broken with sobs, the suffering white face turned upwards, tears streaming down the white, drawn cheeks, and the delicate jewelled hands clasped tightly together. 'O God, if to-night I could bring back the years and kneel once more by my darling's crib, and see again his little life trembling at the threshold of death, I would plead with all my soul that Thou wouldst take him to Thyself in his purity and loveliness and innocence; that Thou wouldst shelter him safe in heaven, for there is no sure refuge in all this wicked earth. Then I might hope to meet him. Now there is no hope for "no drunkard can enter the kingdom of heaven."'

Mrs. Bruce bowed her head into her hands and sat silent. In the revelation of this greater sorrow her rebellion frightened her. She heard nothing more, and she knew not when her strange visitor, her mission ended, quietly withdrew and left her alone.

Two hours later the husband, coming home

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