

## Dying for a Drop.

(C. J. Whitmore, in 'The British Messenger'.)

Sitting by the quiet house fireside, the wind and the rain beating upon the windows, the fire blazing and roaring, as it blazes and roars on winter nights only, the day's work done, pen, desk, and room offering an inviting welcome. Just the time to jot down something that has been floating on my mind for many a day.

'You are wanted, sir; a wild-looking woman is waiting in the passage to see you. I could not ask her farther in, for she is ragged and dripping with wet.'

—So the trim, quiet, servant, who is quite accustomed to all kinds of visitors; she 'didn't like it at all at first, but is quite used to it now.'

I go to my visitor; she is standing on the mat, and the rain is pouring from her garments as she stands.

'What has brought you out on such a night?' I inquire.

'I have come to fetch you to see an old acquaintance,' she replies. 'Do you remember Maggie Smith? I see you do; well, she asked me to come and see if you would visit her; she is lying in "the Rents" in Westminster, and wants you.'

—One quiet, regretful glance at fire, desk, pen, then the waterproof coat, thick boots, and the beating wind and rain.

Through the choking gutters, over the plashy roads, past the flickering gas lamps, out of the decent thoroughfares, into courts and alleys that even this rain could not sweeten, and after a prolonged conflict with the tempest, that was not without its pleasantness, we reach 'the Rents.'

A small square of houses two stories high, worn out, squalid, fever-smitten at their best; at their worst—never-failing, swift adjuncts to hospital and infirmary beds and paupers' graves. A small flickering lamp on the staircase made darkness visible up the rotten, dangerous stairs, and we turned into the small back-room. The only furniture was an iron sauce-pan, a yellow basin, and an old box. In the broken-down grate a few grey ashes were smouldering away, an old lamp upon the mantel-piece gave light upon some rags in a corner upon which dressed in rags and covered with an old quilt, a woman lay, tossing in utter unrest of body and soul.

Black hair, streaked with grey, piercing black eyes wildly roving, never still; pallid face, full, deep, red lips; over all, clear witness that there lay the wreck of something that might and ought to have been infinitely brighter and better; but as she lay her own mother would have hated to recognize the child of her love.

'You have come,' she said, in a soft, refined voice, startling out of harmony with her appearance and surroundings; 'I knew you would, though this is not much of a place to come to, and I hear the wind and rain; you have come, and I am glad; I have waited for you with such unutterable longing that the minutes have seemed hours as I have watched for you; but now you are here and I shall get what I am longing and praying for.'

'And what is that?' I ask.

'Something to drink!' she replied. 'I am "dying for a drop!"'

'Do you mean to say that you have sent for me to tramp miles through wind and rain for this?' I inquired angrily.

'Yes, I do!' she replied, 'and I don't see why not; but do let Bet fetch the whiskey; give her a shilling, only one, and I will pray for you as long as I live! I had no money—nothing left to part with, all my friends are tired out, there was only you left, and I am longing for a drop! Don't say no. If I asked you for bread, or meat, or tea, or coals you would give at once; the whiskey won't cost more, and it's more to me than all other things put together now.'

If she had been starving for food or perishing with cold she could not have turned more wildly-beseeching eyes upon me. I was utterly confounded; all ideas of right and wrong seemed to turn upside down; if she had raved, had uttered oaths, had asked food, that would have been ordinary experience; but to hear the soft, refined, beseeching tones so touchingly pleading for that which had wrought her such evil was something so new and confusing that I found myself uncertainly debating what to do.

'I must not, I dare not, I ought not!' I said at length; 'you know the evil the drink has done you, and how can you ask me to give you more?'

'How can I ask?' she repeated; 'because I want it so. Come nearer and let me tell you; the doctor was here this afternoon and he told Bet it was all over with me, that I should be gone before the morning. I asked him to order me something to drink, and he turned and went down-stairs without a word. But you won't be so hard-hearted, I know; I should be glad if you would read to me and talk to me, but I could not listen with this raging within. Just a very little would do for a time, and then I want to tell you something before I go. If you will only give me a very little I will tell you the other things that I sent for you to hear, but—just a little whiskey first.'

'Ask me for anything in reason,' I rejoined, 'and I will most gladly do it for you; but it would cost me never-ending regret to give you strong drink now;—I ought not, I will not.'

'Bah!' said Bet, as she left the room, 'I told you it would be of no use; and, if I had not fetched him, I'd have had it out of him for you before now; but I'll try down-stairs if I can't get enough for half a quartern; if he hadn't come through wind and rain to see you I'd have made him give it you!'

She clattered noisily down the rotten stairs, evidently bent upon procuring some strong drink by any possible means. While she was gone I sat looking at Maggie in silence, for I saw it was useless to speak of anything else while that awful look of expectancy was upon her face.

It was not long before Bet returned with a white mug lacking its handle, in which was the spirit so craved for. She looked defiantly upon me as she tenderly raised her companion, slowly poured the strong liquor into her quivering lips, and after all was gone she left the room.

'Now,' said Maggie, 'I shall be strong for a little while; it's like the old life and strength I had before I loved it—while it lasts—and I'll tell you what I want to say while I can.'

'You know how many times I have come to you; each time I meant to give up drinking, but I never did. The truth was, my father was an officer in the church and he dealt in strong drink; from my earliest childhood it was all round me. I used to smell it always—then I came to taste it—then to like it—then to love it. Before I was sixteen I would drink as much as I dared whenever I could get it. My mother was dead; my father was always engrossed in the business, and for a long time he did not see; but I think he suspected at last, for he sent me from home to a boarding-school. There I had plenty of money but no drink at all, until I had time to watch which of the servants liked to drink; then it was easy. I gave her the money, she procured the drink, and we had it secretly when we could. After I left school I was put to learn dressmaking; I think I really loved learning, and I know I was clever at my work, and, now that I had my liberty when work was done, I could do as I pleased, and have all the drink I could pay for.'

'But, just then, the drink lost its hold upon me entirely. I had become acquainted with a young man, and we came to love each other dearly. Like myself he was well educated and exceedingly fond of poetry. Not like me, as I had been, he could not bear even the name of strong drink; it was something about his mother, but I never asked particulars and he never told me; he never spoke of it but once.

'Time went on; we were happy, he at his work, I at mine, until the old love of the drink returned and seemed to haunt me. The thought of it never left me asleep or awake; I bore it as long as I could, then I thought I would quiet myself by having just a little, and I went into a tavern to get it. There the very smell of it seemed to madden me with lust for it; the more I drank the more I wanted; I became quarrelsome when they would serve me no more, and they thrust me out. I was staggering from the thrust on the pavement and should have fallen into the gutter, but a man caught my arm and held me. I turned upon him in unreasoning anger and looked in his face; there I saw eyes that I knew dilated with horror, lips that I loved quivering with disgust and shame. He helped me to the wall and left me. I have never seen him since.

'But the pure love died out of my heart, and the love of the drink took its place and kept it. It was not like his love, for it never left me through good or ill.'

Her voice had grown very tender while she was speaking; the power of memory, excited by the drink, had carried her back into the past, and she evidently lived again the days she described.

'I have had many a bitter fight for it,' she continued; 'sometimes I could go without for weeks together, then my skill procured me clothing and a decent home. Again I must have drink, and home and clothing and money all went for it. I never made companions; no other man ever spoke of love to me; the drink destroyed my first dream, and I never dreamed again. I have seen many reverses—sometimes dressed well, quiet, respectable, outwardly happy, but never for long; at other times I would have to sleep in common fever-stricken lodging-houses, going from thence to make the

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