

* * The Story Page * *

His Brother's Keeper.

MAHEL VERNON JONES.

"It is perfectly absurd, mother! I always said I never would be so weak as to sign a pledge and I hardly think I will disgrace my manhood now by putting my name on a bit of paper like a school-boy, expecting that to cure me instead of a will! I know my strength. I can take a glass or leave it alone, just as I please. It is not the slightest temptation to me. I would scorn to drown my reason in the wine cup, or wreck my physical health by intemperance!"

Walter King stood looking down at his mother, from his five feet, eleven inches, his handsome face flushed and his dark eyes alight with an expression of haughty scorn.

Mrs. King was sitting in a low rocker in front of the fire in the cosy breakfast room, looking up at her tall son with a pair of clear gray eyes in which pride and pain were equally mingled. Pride—because such a son was hers, handsome, upright and clever. Pain—because her simple request had met with such a scornful and decided refusal.

"But, Walter, surely you will do it to please me. I have perfect faith in your word, and once your name is on this 'bit of paper,' as you call it, I should have not the slightest fear for you. Intoxicants, I know are not your special temptation, but, think of the weaker brethren. Your influence is strong, my son, and were you to sign this pledge, many of those who lack your strength of will and character would follow suit. Think about it, Walter, look at it on all its sides, and consider whether or not the results might not be worth the act, weak and childish as it may seem to you.

"I wish you could have seen Elsie Lee's face when she asked that 'we please sign her pledge.' I could almost imagine that an angel had stepped down from heaven and made that request, she looked so fair and sweet and innocent. It is beautiful to see the little ones interested in such a work and they should receive every encouragement." So saying, Mrs. King rose and left the room while her son remained gazing moodily into the fire until the clock striking the hour reminded him that it was time to leave for the office.

They had been all in all to each other, this mother and son, ever since death had removed from them three years before the beloved husband and father. Walter had taken his father's place in the prosperous firm of Bargrave and King and was fast making an enviable reputation for honorable dealing and superior business ability.

In the eyes of many, his was almost a flawless character, but those who knew him best, could not be blind to certain faults which like ill-weeds growing among beautiful flowers, threatened to choke and destroy them, taking to themselves the nourishment which would otherwise strengthen the flowers.

Self-conceit and an almost unconquerable obstinacy of disposition, had grown with his growth and strengthened with his strength, nourished no doubt by the unwise remarks of admiring friends, until now, once his opinion had been formed upon any subject, it seemed as though no power on earth could cause him to change his mind. Fortunately, as though he was not a Christian, he usually took his stand on the right side of a question, though sometimes, as in the present instance, he was on the wrong. Since he had refused so decidedly to sign the pledge, his mother felt that it was almost useless to hope that he would change his mind. Her faith, in the power of God, however, was strong, so she prayed and waited.

A few evenings after the conversation just related, Mrs. King was sitting in the library reading, waiting for her son's return from the office.

Nine o'clock struck, ten, half past, and still he did not come. At last she began to grow quite uneasy, and laying her book on the table, she rose and went to the window. Drawing aside the heavy curtains she looked out. The brightly lighted street so full of busy, bustling life by day, was now, owing to the lateness of the hour, almost deserted. She looked in the direction of the office, but no one was in sight but a policeman and a group of men who by their unsteady steps suggested a recent visit to some gilded palace of Satan.

She returned to the fire, took up her book and tried to read, but in vain. Her mind was far too distracted to feel any interest in the pages before her.

Another hour passed by. At length, just as the suspense was growing almost unbearable, she heard a step in the hall and her son entered the room.

"Walter, my son! What has happened? Are you ill?"

Walter's wavy brown hair was disordered, his usually ruddy face pale and drawn and he looked like a man who was just recovering from a severe attack of illness. He sank into an armchair before the fire and buried his face in his hands. His mother went to him and softly stroked the bowed head.

"Tell me, my boy, what the trouble is." Something in that mother's touch seemed like an electric thrill which set loose all the floods of pent up emotion; and Walter King, man though he was, sobbed like a child.

Mrs. King seated herself near him and waited until his emotion had somewhat subsided. It was no physical pain, she knew, but that which is far harder sometimes to endure—agony of the soul.

At length he raised his head, pushed back the hair from his burning brow and said: "Mother, please bring me that pledge, I want to sign it."

Without a word, Mrs. King rose and going to her secretaire, took from a drawer, a small pledge card, which she handed to her son. She watched him in silence as he wrote his name in bold, clear characters at the end of the pledge.

She replaced the card in the drawer and Walter leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. His mother saw upon his face an expression which she had never seen there before, intense self-diagnosis mingled curiously with a look of deep pain and sorrow.

She felt that some crisis had occurred in his life; that something had opened his eyes to that to which before he had been blind. She seated herself, and waited patiently for the story which she knew would come.

Five, ten minutes passed in silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock and an occasional step on the pavement without.

"You were surprised, mother, at my signing the pledge to-night. Would, to God, I had done so when you asked me! A precious young life would have been saved and I spared the sting of a life-long remorse.

"Just as I was leaving the office to-night, a boy handed me this," and Walter took from his pocket a note which he read aloud.

"Dear Mr. King:—Could you kindly come to the house at once? Hermon is very, very ill and has requested me to send for you.

Sincerely yours,

E. L. HAYWARD.

"I was shocked and grieved by the news of Hermon's illness as only last night I had seen him at the dance, full of life and spirits and the very embodiment of health. I went to the house immediately not even waiting to send you word of my whereabouts. A servant admitted me and showed me at once to Hermon's room. Oh! the sad, sad change in twenty-four hours, and to think that I,—I was the cause of it!"

Again overcome by emotion, he buried his face in his hands.

At length he continued: "The mother and doctor were both in the room when I entered but at Hermon's earnest request we were left alone together. I took the chair at the head of the bed and leaned over him as he talked for he was so weak he could only whisper his words.

"What he told me has burned itself into my very soul! Never to my dying day shall I forget that hour! Never can that scene be blotted from my memory! My wicked conceit and obstinacy have to-night received a blow from which, God grant, they may never recover.

"Last night at Mrs. Stafford's dance I took the first glass of wine I had taken for sometime. The rooms were very warm and I was bound by no pledge, so when pretty Evelyn Stafford offered me a glass of the sparkling beverage, I accepted it with thanks, drank it and enjoyed one of the pleasantest dances of the season. Hermon was standing near me at the time although I did not know it and saw me take the wine.

"I had always been, he said, his ideal of manhood, and almost unconsciously he had been patterning after me. He told me that of late he had been growing far too fond of wine and that either he must abstain from it entirely or else run the terrible risk of filling a drunkard's grave. A member of the Junior Temperance League had asked him to sign the pledge. He had hesitated and finally told him to wait awhile until he had thought it over. He had almost decided to sign it when he saw me take that wine last night. Instantly Satan whispered in his ear, 'If Walter King can take a glass or leave it alone, why cannot you? He would never be so foolish as to sign a pledge, so why should you show your weakness in such a way? Take a glass and prove that you can be as temperate as he!'

The result was, that when a few minutes later, another pretty girl, with a most bewitching smile offered him a glass, he drank it.

"I drank mine and was satisfied, having not the slightest desire for more. Not so, Hermon! That single glass was like a spark to tinder. The will weakened by long indulgence gave way to appetite and during the evening he found many excuses for visiting the dining-room, that by the time the dance was over, he was just able to leave the house without becoming conspicuous. Strange to say, none of the gentlemen seemed to notice his condition, I being as blind as the rest, and he was left to find his way home as best he could.

"He remembers nothing after leaving the house until he awoke, to find himself in bed in his own room at

home; his mother and sister weeping beside him and the doctor bidding him prepare for death.

"The two policemen who carried him home said that they had found him half crushed in Trant's Alley, where some heavy team had passed over his unconscious body in the darkness, without seeing it.

"He begged me as his dying request to sign the pledge and use all my influence in the cause of temperance. I vowed then and there that never again should anyone be able to point to me and say, 'He caused my ruin. He was the stumbling block which turned my steps aside from the upright path!'

"A few minutes later I saw the end was coming and called the family. He soon breathed his last, his hand clasped in his mother's.

I left the stricken household, burdened with a feeling of guilt which will never leave me. You, only, mother, know my share in that death. Henceforward, if God spares my life, my influence, whether it be small or great, shall be used in the cause of temperance!"

Mrs. King clasped her son's hands in silence, her face more eloquent than words.

But we will draw the curtain on that scene. Too sacred was it for any eye but God's. Into a soul that night a light had dawned which was, not like the will-o-the-wisp to lead into dark and dangerous places; but a bright and shining star, pointing ever upward and onward to that "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

The Pearl Fisher.

BY LAURA E. RICHARDS.

Tom was going to be a sailor, and Jenny came downstairs to see him off.

"Here is a lucky-bone for you, Tom," she said. "I found it on the beach when I was at the sea shore, and it will keep you safe from ship-wreck."

Tom thanked her, and put the lucky-bone in his pocket. Then he got into his boat, and rowed away across the broad parlor floor.

The boat went rather hard over the carpet, for it was a clothes-basket, and the tongs did not make very good oars; but he got on pretty well till he came to the grand piano.

"Here is the harbor," he said. "I shall go in here to get pearls, Jenny. Only I must beware of the Leg Rocks."

"Yes, do beware!" said Jenny. "And be sure to bring me home some pearls, Tom."

Tom promised, and then began the dangerous entrance into Piano Harbor. He avoided the Leg Rocks very skillfully; but, in standing up to steer round them, he struck his head pretty sharply against the top of the harbor.

"Oh," said Jenny, "if you hadn't had the lucky-bone you might have hurt yourself!"

"Yes," said Tom; and he rubbed his head hard and winked several times, but said nothing.

"Are you getting many pearls, Tommy?" asked Jenny.

Tom felt in his pockets; but there was nothing in them, for a wonder, save a pencil, some crumbs, and the lucky-bone.

"Pretty well," he said. "Very likely I could get a great many more if I stayed longer; but I think I'd better come home now, for the water is so full of sharks that I can hardly pull the boat."

"Oh, do come back!" cried Jenny, jumping up and down on the bank. "O Tom, what would you do if a shark jumped into the boat?"

"Stick an oar down his throat, of course!" replied Tom, promptly.

Here, while keeping a sharp lookout for sharks, the bold pearl-fisher, ran into the Leg Rocks, and was almost capsized; but he handled the boat with great skill, and finally managed to push her off. After some minutes of hard pulling, during which Jenny stood speechless, with clasped hands, he reached the shore.

Jenny glowed with pride in her hero. "O Tom, I am so glad you have come back safe!" she cried. "Oh, how brave you are! I am sure I saw those dreadful sharks after you! But where are the pearls?"

"Here," said Tom; and he handed her the lucky-bone.

"They are bee-yutiful pearls!" she said. "I shall have an imperial crown made out of them, and a necklace and teeth. I always thought 'teeth like pearls' sounded lovely, you know. I say, Tom, wasn't it good that I gave you the lucky-bone? If I hadn't, you couldn't have brought me any pearls, or only string and pencil ones."

"So I couldn't," said Tom.

"And you might really have hurt your head," said Jenny.

"So I might," said Tom; and he rubbed his head, where already there was a lump as large as an egg.—Youth's Companion.