

A Strange Follower.

In a certain street off one of the main thoroughfares of the Borough, bearing not the best of characters, I was one afternoon making a few calls, when I noticed a big, hulking fellow standing at a corner, closely watching me. I judged from his appearance that he had been drinking, though he was fairly steady on his legs. There was at the time a great 'strike' on in the South of London. As I was about to pass him the man suddenly stepped in front of me.

'I say, guv'ner, wot's th' little game on now?'

'That's my business,' I replied, looking him straight in the face.

'We don't want any — interferin' down here,' he said, speaking roughly.

'I'm not interfering with anyone, simply about my business.'

'An' I'll find out what yer bizness is, if I follers yer till midnight,' interlarding his speech with sundry oaths unnecessary to record.

'Come along then; there will be no difficulty about that,' and I walked on.

I hardly thought he would do so, but he seemed in earnest about the matter and started off, keeping about a dozen yards behind as I passed along two or three short streets. Rather amused, though somewhat puzzled to know what to do with the man, I thought it would do no harm if I could get him down to the Hall, and therefore took the next turn in that direction.

'Come along,' said I, as he seemed to be lagging a little behind; 'there's nothing to be afraid of.'

'Who's afeard?' and he hurried up a little.

Coming to the Hall, I quietly opened a side door and invited him to enter a passage leading to one of the ante-rooms. He hesitated for a moment.

'Honor bright, guv'ner—no bobbies about?'

'Certainly not; I've no business with them. Come along; there's nothing to be afraid of.'

'Who's afeard?' and without more ado he followed me into one of the rooms, used as an office or a committee room. It was plainly furnished, but the walls were adorned with the portraits of temperance veterans well known in the South of London, who seemed to be looking down, watching with interest what was then taking place. Who shall say they are not actually with us in spirit, even as we know they are ever with us in the splendid records of their lives?'

'Now, then,' said I, taking down from the cupboard a pledge-book and placing it before him, 'my business is to take from you the teetotal pledge!'

'Good Lor'!'

This exclamation was not made in reference to my remark in respect to business, his whole attention being fixed on one of the portraits so that he did not seem to hear what I had been saying.

'What's the matter?' asked I.

'Why, that's M——! He's lookin' at me! I can feel th' touch o' his hand on my shoulder!' and, his whole frame trembling with excitement, he sat down, or rather fell into a chair just behind him.

I could see that he was strangely moved by some memory of the past the sight of the portrait had recalled, so quietly watched him for a minute or so. He sat staring at the portrait for a while, and then began, as if talking to it:

'Don't ee look at me like that, mister. I won't do it, s'help me God!' and he bowed his head on the table, shaking his big frame with sobs.

I thought I would give him time to recover himself in his own way, and did not therefore disturb the poor fellow. Presently he looked up.

'I say, guv'ner, I made a mistake in follerin' you. I was half drunk at th' time or I shouldn't 'a' done it, but I'm sober enough now, no fear,' and he rose up as if to go.

'Please keep your seat,' said I; 'you haven't yet heard what I have to say about my business.'

'I begs your pardon, an' I'm very sorry I interfered wi' you in any way.'

'Then you'll listen while I just explain that my business is to take your name in this pledge-book,' and I pushed it towards him.

'I say, guv'ner, do you know what little job I'd got in hand when I spoke to you at the corner?'

'Certainly not, and I don't wish to know, unless you desire to tell me.'

'I'd better out with it, guv'ner. I shall be a bit easier in my mind then. When I stopped you at th' corner I was waitin' for a pal o' mine, an' we was goin' to have another drop or two an' then off into th' country to crack a crib as had bin marked; a matter as might have ended not only in robbery but in murder, for we're neither on us very particular when on a job. When I came in here an' saw that face lookin' down on me, 'twas all up wi' crackin'. I could see his eyes fixed on me, an' feel his hand on my shoulder, an' hear his voice whisperin' in my ear, just th' same as he did when I was goin' wrong twenty years ago.'

'He being dead yet speaketh,' I said, 'and you have only to look into his face to think of what he is now saying.'

'I can see him now, guv'ner, as plain as I can see that pictur'. I was comin' out o' th' Lambeth Baths. "George," said he, puttin' his hand on my shoulder, "let me warn you against evil men, bad ways, and strong drink; you are goin' the wrong road, my lad; turn round at once, take th' first turnin' to th' right, an' keep straight on. Let the first step be to sign th' pledge, my lad." He seems to be speakin' now just in th' same way. I can't think what made me foller you, gov'ner, or what made you bring me down here.'

'Perhaps it was the hand of God. He might have brought us together here to give you another opportunity of following the wise counsel you then neglected. I feel this to be a very solemn moment. Let this opportunity slip and such another may never come. Now is the accepted time, to-day is the day of salvation.'

I again called his attention to the pledge-book, dipped a pen in some ink, and held it out to him. He took the pen in his hand and made as if to sign; then suddenly dropped it on the table.

'Wot's th' good? I've gone too fur down th' wrong road to turn back now.'

'No, you have not,' I replied; 'remember the words spoken—take the first turning to the right and keep straight on. You are now close to that turning. Man, alive! don't pass it, for you may never come to another!'

'Well, then, here goes!' and without further hesitation he took up the pen and signed his name; then looking up at me, asked in quick, decisive tones, quite unlike his previous mode of speech, 'Now, guv'ner, wot's the next move?'

I was rather taken to by the abruptness of the man, and hesitated for a moment as to the 'next move,' but, obeying an inward impulse, I said:

'Let us pray.'

One does not care to write more as to this, but I might say that when we again sat down, and tried to look at one another, neither could see very clearly by reason of the dimness.

'You have taken the first turn to the right, George—for that appears to be your name.

Keep straight on, and you will soon find yourself in a new world. I expect you will have to do a bit of fighting, but pull yourself together and stand up to it like a man. You'll never want for a helper as long as Christ lives, and that is for ever.'

The man sprang suddenly from his seat, and smiting his great chest with one hand, he lifted the other on high, crying aloud:

'In God's name, I'll win!'

'That's the way,' said I.

He then dropped into his chair again, turning pale, as if overcome by some thought or feeling.

'What is the matter, George?' I asked.

'I—I wur thinkin' about th' missis an' th' two kids,' and he bowed his head on the table.

I have often thought how strangely mysterious is the quickening of a man's conscience, even when it seems, as it does in some cases, hopelessly dead. Thus the conscience of David was suddenly and fully quickened by the simple word-picture of the ewe lamb drawn by the prophet. So also as regards the subject of our little story. One glance at the portrait of a noble Christian worker with whom, years before, he had been brought into some relationship, suddenly quickens the conscience. Moreover, the quickening is as full as it is sudden, otherwise why should the man be so touched by the thought of his wife and children, for whom he had not before cared with even the instinct of a brute. It must be that the spirit of God works with the rapidity of lightning. Though I have in many similar cases tried to watch the effects thus rapidly shown, it is impossible for me to give any psychological explanation.

George went home that evening—of course, I went with him—a changed man, and he is now enjoying the new world in which he lives, a useful as well as a happy Christian worker. It is unnecessary to say that the best portrait to be obtained of M—— occupies the place of honor in his regenerated home.—'Temperance Record.'

Somebody's Mother.

The woman was old and ragged and gray,
And bent with the chill of a winter's day;
The streets were white with a recent snow,
And the woman's feet with age were slow.

At the crowded crossing she waited long,
Jostled aside by the careless throng
Of human beings who passed her by,
Unheeding the glance of her anxious eye.

Down the street with laughter and shout,
Glad in the freedom of 'school let out,'
Come happy boys like a flock of sheep,
Hailing the snow piled white and deep;
Past the woman so old and gray,
Hastened the children on their way.

None offered a helping hand to her,
So weak and timid, afraid to stir,
Lost the carriage wheels, or the horses' feet,
Should trample her down in the slippery street.

At last came out of the merry troop
The gayest boy of all the group;
He paused beside her, and whispered low,
'I'll help you across, if you wish to go.'

Her aged hand on his strong young arm
She placed, and so without hurt or harm
He guided the trembling feet along.
Proud that his own were young and strong;
Then back again to his friends he went,
His young heart happy and well content.

'She's somebody's mother, boys, you know
For all she's aged and poor and slow:
And someone some time, may lend a hand
To help your mother—you understand?—
If ever she's old and peor and gray,
And her own dear boy so far away.'

'Somebody's mother' bowed low her head
In her home that night, and the prayer she
said
Was: 'God be kind to that noble boy,
Who is somebody's son and pride and joy.'
—'Waif.'