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"IT'S ONLY A DROP."

It was a cold winter's night, and though the cottage where Ellen and Michael, the two surviving children of old Ben Murphy, lived, was always neat and comfortable, still there was a cloud over the brow of both brother and sister, as they sat before the cheerful fire; it had obviously been spread not by anger, but by sorrow. The silence had continued long, though it was not bitter. At last Michael drew away from his sister's eyes the checked apron she had applied to them, and taking her hand affectionately within his own, said, "It isn't for my own sake, Ellen, though the Lord knows I shall be lonesome enough, the long winter nights and the long summer days without your wise saying and your sweet song, and your merry laugh, that I can so well remember—ay, since the time when our poor mother used to seat us on the new rug, and then, in the innocent pride of heart, call our father to look at us, and preach to us against being conceited, at the very time she was making us proud as peacocks by calling us her blossoms of beauty, and her heart's blood, and her king and queen."

"God and the Blessed Virgin make her bed in heaven, now and for evermore, amen," said Ellen, at the same time drawing out her beads, and repeating an Ave. "Ah, Mike," she added, "that was the mother, and the father too, full of grace and godliness."

"True for ye, Ellen; but that's not what I'm after now, as you well know, your blushing little rogue of the world; and so, as I'll say against it in the end, though it's lonesome I'll be on my own hearth-stone, with no one to keep me company but the old black cat, that can't see, let alone hear, the craythur."

"Now," said Ellen, wiping her eyes, and smiling her own bright smile, "have off; ye're just like all the men, pretending to one thing, when they mean another; there's a dale of deceit about them—all—every one of them—and so my mother often said. Now, you'd better have done, or maybe I'll say something that will bring, if not the color to your brown cheek, a dale more warmth to yer warm heart, than would be convenient, just by the mention of one Mary—Mary! what a party name it is; isn't it?—it's a common name too, and yet you like it none the worse for that. Do you mind the old rhyme—

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary?"

Well, I'm not going to say she is contrary—I'm sure she's anything but that to you, any way, brother Mike. Can't you sit still, and don't be pulling the hairs out of Pusheen cat's tail, it isn't many there's in it; and I'd think you not to unravel the beautiful English cotton stocking I'm knitting; have off your tricks, or I'll make common talk of it, I will, and be more than even with you, my fine fellow! Indeed, poor old Pusheen," she continued, addressing the cat with great gravity, "never heed what he says to you; he has no notion to make you either head or tail to the house, not he; he won't let you be without a mistress to give you yer sup of milk, or yer bit of sop; he won't let you be lonesome, my poor puss; he's glad enough to swap an Ellen for a Mary, so he is; but that's a secret, avourneen, don't tell it to any one."

"Any thing for your happiness," replied the brother, somewhat sulkily; "but your bachelor has a worse fault than ever I had, notwithstanding all the lecturing you keep on to me; he has a turn for the drop, Ellen, you know he has."

"How spitefully you said that," replied Ellen; "and it isn't generous to spake of it when he's not here to defend himself."

"You'll not let a word go against him," said Michael.

"No," she said, "I will never let ill be spoken of an absent friend. I know he has a turn for the drop, but I'll cure him."

"After he's married," observed Michael, not very good-naturedly.

"No," she answered, "before. I think a girl's chance of happiness is not worth much who trusts to after-marriage reformation. I won't. Didn't I reform you, Mike, of the shockin' bad habit you had of putting every thing off to the last? and after reforming a brother, who knows what I may do with a lover! Do you think that Larry's heart is harder than yours, Mike? Look who fine vegetables we have in our garden now, all planted by your own hands when you come home from work—planted during the very time when you used to spend in leaning against the door cheek, or smoking your pipe, or sleeping over the fire; look at the money you got from the Agricultural Society?"

"That's yours, Ellen," said the generous-hearted Mike; "I'll never touch a penny of it; but for you I never should have had it; I'll never touch it."

"You never shall," she answered; "I've laid it every penny out, so that when the young bride comes home, she'll have such a house of comforts as are not to be found in the parish—wonder-table-cloths for Sunday; a little store of tay and

sugar, soap, candles, starch, everything good, and plenty of it."

"My own dear, generous sister," exclaimed the young man.

"I shall ever be your sister," she replied, "and hers too. She's a good 'colleen,' and worthy my own Mike, and that's more than I would say to 'ere another in the parish. I wasn't in earnest when I said you'd be glad to get rid of me; so put the pouch, every bit of it, off yer handsome face. And hush!—winst! will ye! there's the sound of Larry's footstep in the bawn—hand me the needles, Mike."

She braided back her hair with both hands, arranged the red ribbon that confined its luxuriance, in the little glass that hung upon a nail on the dresser, and after composing her arch laughing features into an expression of great gravity, sat down, and applied herself with singular industry to take up the stitches her brother had dropped, and put on a look of right maidenly astonishment when the door opened, and Larry's good-humored face entered with the salutation of "God save all here!" He popped his head in first, and, after gazing round, presented his goodly person to their view; and a pleasant view it was, for he was of genuine Irish bearing and beauty—frank and manly, and fearless-looking. Ellen, the wicked one, looked up with well-feigned astonishment, and exclaimed, "Oh, Larry, is it you, and who would have thought of seeing you this blessed night?—ye're lucky—just in time for a bit of supper after your walk across the moor. I cannot think what in the world makes you walk over that moor so often; you'll get wet feet, and yer mother'll be forced to nurse you. Of all the walks in the county, the walk across that moor's the dreariest, and yet ye're always going it. I wonder you haven't better sense; ye're not such a chicken now."

"Well," interrupted Mike, "it's the women that hates the world for desaving. Sure she heard yer step when nobody else could; it's echo struck on her heart, Larry—let her deny it: she'll make a shove off if she can; she'll twist you and twist you and turn you about, so that you won't know whether it's on your head or your heels ye're standing. She'll tossicate yer brains in no time and be as composed herself as a dove on her nest in a storm. But ask her, Larry, the straightforward question, whether she heard you or not. She'll tell no lie—she never does."

Ellen shook her head at her brother, and laughed. And immediately after, the happy trio sat down to a cheerful supper.

Larry was a good tradesman, blithe, and 'well-to-do' in the world; and had it not been for the one great fault—an inclination to take the 'least taste in life more' when he had already taken quite enough—there could not have been found a better match for good, excellent Ellen Murphy, in the whole kingdom of Ireland.—When supper was finished, the everlasting whiskey bottle was produced, and Ellen resumed her knitting. After a time, Larry pressed his suit to Michael for the industrious hand of his sister, thinking, doubtless, with the natural self-conceit of all mankind, that he was perfectly secure with Ellen; but though Ellen loved like all my fair countrywomen, well, she loved, I am sorry to say, unlike the generality of my fair countrywomen, wisely, and reminded her lover that she had seen him intoxicated at the last fair of Rathcoloin.

"Dear Ellen," he exclaimed, "it was only a drop, the least taste in life that overcame me. It overtook me unknown, quite against my will."

"Who poured it down your throat, Larry?"

"Who poured it down my throat is it? Why, myself, to be sure; but are you going to stink me for three months for that?"

"Larry, will you listen to me, and remember that the man I marry must be converted before we stand before the priest. I have no faith whatever in conversions after."

"Oh, Ellen!" interrupted her lover.

"It's no use ob'lecting me," she answered quickly; "I have made my resolution, and I'll stick to it."

"She's as obstinate as ten women," said her brother. "There's no use in attempting to contradict her; she always has had her own way."

"It's very cruel of you, Ellen, not to listen to reason. I tell you a table-spoonful will often upset me."

"If you know that, Larry, why do you take the table-spoonful?"

Larry could not reply to this question. He could only plead that the drop got the better of him, and the temptation, and the overcomingness of the thing, and it was very hard to be at him so about a trifle.

"I know you are not one yet; but six grows mighty strong upon us without our knowledge.—And no matter what indulgence leads to bad, we've a right to think anything that does lead to it sinful in the prospect, if not at the present."

"You'd have made a fine priest, Ellen," said the young man, determined, if he could not reason, to laugh her out of her resolve.

"I don't think," she replied, archly, "if I was a priest, that either of you would have liked to come to me to confession."

"But, Ellen, dear Ellen, sure it's not in positive downright earnest you are; you can't think of putting me off on account of that unlucky drop, the least taste in life I took at the fair.—You could not find it in your heart. Speak for me, Michael, speak for me. But I see it's joking you are. Why, Lent'll be on us in no time, and then we must wait till Easter—it's easy talking."

"Larry," interrupted Ellen, "do not you talk yourself into a passion; it will do no good;—none in the world. I am sure you love me, and I confess before my brother it will be the delight of my heart to return that love, and make myself worthy of you, if you will only break yourself of that one habit, which you qualify to your own undoing, by fancying, because the least taste in life makes you what you ought not to be, that you may still take it."

"I'll take an oath against the whiskey, if that will please ye, till Christmas."

"And when Christmas comes, get twice as tipsy as ever, with joy to thank your oath is out—no."

"I'll swear anything you please."

"I don't want you to swear at all; there is no use in a man's taking an oath at all. I want your reason to be convinced."

"My darling Ellen, all the reason I ever had in my life is convinced."

"Prove it by abstaining from taking even a drop, even the least drop in life, if that drop can make you ashamed to look your poor Ellen in the face."

"I'll give it up altogether."

"I hope you will one of these days, from a conviction that it is really bad in every way;—but not from cowardice, not because you dar'n't trust yourself."

"Ellen, I'm sure ye've some English blood in yer veins, yer such a reasoner. Irish women don't often throw a boy off because of a drop."

"Listen to me, Larry, and believe that, though I spake this way, I regard you truly; and if I do not, I'd not take the trouble to tell you my mind."

"Like Mick Brady's wife, who, whenever she thrashed him, cried over the blows, and said they were all for his good," observed her brother slyly.

"Nonsense—listen to me, I say, and I'll tell you why I am so resolute. It's many a long day since, going to school, I used to meet—Michael minds her, too, I'm sure—an old bent woman; they used to call her the Witch of Ballaghton. Stacy was, as I have said, very old entirely, withered and white-headed, bent nearly double with age, and she used to be ever and always muddling about the streams and ditches, gathering herbs and plants; and at first girls used to watch, rather far off, and if they thought they had a good chance of escaping her tongue and the stones she flung at them, they'd call her an ill name or two, and sometimes, old as she was, she'd make a spring at them sideways like a crab, and howl, and hoot, and scream, and then they'd be off like a flock of pigeons from a hawk, and she'd go on disturbing the green-coated waters with her crooked stick, and muttering words which none, if they heard, could understand. Stacy had been a well-reared woman, and knew a dale more than any of us;—when not tormented by the children, she was mighty well-spoken, and the gentry thought a dale about her more than she did about them; for she'd say there wasn't one in the country fit to tie her shoe; and tell them so, too, if they'd call her anything but Lady Stacy."

"One day Mike had gone home before me, and coming down the back bogreen, who should I see moving along it but Lady Stacy; and on she came muttering and mumbling to herself till she got near me, and as she did, I heard Master Nixon's (the dog tax collector) bound in full cry, and saw him at her heels, and he over the hedge encouraging the baste to tear her in pieces.—The dog soon was up with her, and then she leapt him off as well as she could with her crutch, cursing the entire time, and I was very frightened, but I darted to her side, and with a wattle I pulled out of the hedge, did my best to keep him off her."

"Master Nixon cursed at me with all his heart, but I wasn't to be turned off that way.—Stacy, herself, laid about with her staff, but the ugly brute would have finished her only for me. I don't suppose Nixon meant that, but the dog was savage, and some men, like him, delight in

cruelty. Well, I beat the dog; and then I had to help the poor fainting woman, for she was both faint and hurt. I didn't much like bringing her here, for the people said she wasn't lucky; however, she wanted help, and I gave it. When I got her on the floor, I thought a drop of whiskey would revive her, and, accordingly, I offered her a glass. I shall never forget the venom with which she dashed it to the ground."

"Do you want to poison me," she shouted, "after saving my life?" When she came to herself a little, she made me sit down by her side, and fixing her large gray eyes upon my face, she kept rocking her body backwards and forwards, while she spoke, as well as I can remember—what I'll try to tell you—but I can't tell it as she did—that wouldn't be in nature.—"Ellen," she said, and her eyes fixed in my face, "I wasn't always a poor lone creature, that every ruffin who walks the country dare set his ear at. There was full and plenty in my father's house when I was young, but before I grew to womanly estate, its walls were bare and roofless. What made them so?—drink!—whiskey! My father was in debt; to kill thought, he tried to keep himself so that he could not think; he wanted the courage of a man to look his danger and difficulty in the face, and overcome it; for, Ellen, mind my words, the man that will look debt and danger steadily in the face, and resolve to overcome them, can do so. He had not means, he said, to educate his children as became them; he grew not to have means to find them or their poor patient mother the proper necessaries of life, yet he found the means to keep the whiskey cask flowing, and to answer the landlord's knocks for admission by the loud roar of drunkenness, mad, as it was wicked. They got in at last, in spite of the care taken to keep them out, and there was much fighting, ay, and blood spilt, but not to death; and while the riot was a-foot, and we were crying round the death-bed of a dying mother, where was he?—they had raised a ten-gallon cask of whiskey on the table in the parlor, and astride on it sat my father, flourishing the huge pewter funnel in one hand, and the black-jack streaming with whiskey in the other; and amid the fumes of hot punch that flowed over the room, his voice was heard swearing 'he had lived like a king, and would die like a king.'"

"And your poor mother?" I asked.

"Thank God! she died that night—she died before worse came; she died on the bed that, before her corpse was cold, was dragged from under her—through the strong drink—through the badness of him who ought to have saved her; not that he was a bad man either, when the whiskey had no power over him, but he could not bear his own reflections. And his end soon came. He didn't die like a king; he died smothered in a ditch, where he fell; he died, and was in the presence of God—how? Oh, there are things that have had whiskey as their beginning and their end, that make me as mad as ever it made him! The man takes a drop, and forgets his starting family; the mother takes it, and forgets she is a mother and wife. It's the curse of Ireland—a bitterer, blacker, deeper curse than ever was put on it by foreign power or hard-made laws."

"God bless us!" was Larry's half-breathed ejaculation.

"I only repeat old Stacy's words," said Ellen, "you see I never forget them. 'You may think,' she continued, 'that I had had warning enough to keep me from having anything to say to those who were too fond of drink, and I think I had; but somehow, Edward Lambert got round me with his sweet words, and I was lone and unprotected. I knew he had a little fondness for the drop; but in him, young, handsome, and gay-hearted, with bright eyes and sunny hair, it did not seem like the horrid drink which had made me shed no tear over my father's grave. I think of that, young girl; the drink doesn't make a man a beast at first, but it will do so before it's done with him—it will do so before it's done with him. I had enough power over Edward, and enough memory of the past, to make him swear against it, except so much as such and such a time, and for a while he was very particular; but one used to entice him, and another used to entice him, and I am not going to say but I might have managed him differently; I might have got him off it—gently, maybe; but the pride got the better of me, and I thought of the fine I came of, and how I had married him who wasn't my equal, and such nonsense, which always breeds disturbance betwix married people; and I used to rave, when, maybe, it would have been wiser if I had reasoned. Any way, things didn't go smooth—not that he neglected his employment; he was industrious, and sorry enough when the fault was done; still he would come home often the worse for drink—and now that he's dead and gone, and an finger is stretched to me but in scorn or hatred, I think may be I might have done better; but, God defend me, the last was hard to bear.' On, boys," said

Ellen, "if you had only heard her voice when she said that, and seen her face—poor old Lady Stacy, no wonder she hated the drop, no wonder she dashed down the whiskey."

"You kept this mighty close, Ellen," said Mike, "I never heard it before."

"I did not like coming over it," she replied; "the last is hard to tell." The girl turned pale while she spoke, and Lawrence gave her a cup of water. "It must be told," she said; "the death of her father, proved the effects of de-liberate drunkenness. What I have to say, shows what may happen from being even once unable to think or act."

"I had one child," said Stacy, "one, a darling, blue-eyed, laughing child. I never saw any so handsome—never knew any so good. She was almost three years old, and he was fond of her—he said he was, but it's a queer fondness that destroys what it ought to save. It was the Pattern of Ladyday, and well I knew that Edward would not return as he went; he said he would, he almost swore he would; but the promise of a man given to drink has no more strength in it than a rope of sand. I took sulky, and wouldn't go; if I had, maybe it would not have ended so. The evening came on, and I thought my baby breathed hard in her cradle; I took the candle and went over to look at her; her little face was red; and when I laid my cheek close to her lips so as not to touch them, but to feel her breath, it was hot—very hot; she tossed her arms, and they were dry and burning. The muscles were about the country, and I was fought for my child. It was only half a mile to the doctor's; I knelt every foot the road; and so leaving the door on the latch I resolved to tell him how my darling was, and thought I should be back before my husband's return. Grass, you may be sure, didn't grow under my feet. I ran with all speed, and wasn't kept long, the doctor said, though it seemed long to me. The moon was down when I came home, though the night was fine. The cabin we lived in was in a hollow; but when I was on the hill, and looked down where I knew it stood, a dark mass, I thought I saw a white light fog coming out of it; I rubbed my eyes, and darted forward as a wild bird flies to its nest when it hears the scream of the hawk in the heavens. When I reached the door, I saw it was open; the same cloud came out of it, sure enough, white and thick; blind with that and terror together, I rushed to my child's cradle. I found my way to it, in spite of the burning and the smothering. But Ellen—Ellen Murphy, my child, the rosy child whose breath had been hot on my cheek only a little while before, she was nothing but a cipher!"

"Mad as I felt, I saw how it was in a minute. The father had come home as I expected; he had gone to the cradle to look at his child, had dropped the candle into the straw, and unable to speak or stand, had fallen down and asleep on the floor not two yards from my child. Oh, how I flew to the doctor's with what had been my baby; I tore across the country like a banister; I laid it in his arms; I told him if he didn't put life in it, I'd destroy him and his house. He thought me mad; for there was no breath, either cold or hot, coming from it lips then. I could not kiss it in death; there was nothing left of my child to kiss—think of that! I scatered it from where the doctor had laid it; I cursed him, for he looked with disgust at my sorry child.—The whole night long I wandered in the woods of Newtownbarry with that burden at my heart."

"But her husband, her husband!" inquired Larry, in accents of horror; "what became of him?—did she leave him in the burning without calling him to himself?"

"No," answered Ellen; "I asked her, and she told me that her shrieks she supposed roused him from the suffocation in which he must but for them have perished. He staggered out of the place, and was found soon after by the neighbors and lived long after, but only to be a poor, heart broken man, for she was mad for years through the country; and many a day after she told me that story, my heart trembled like a willow leaf. And now, Ellen Murphy," she added, when the end was come, "do ye wonder I threw from your hand as poison the glass you offered me? And do you know why I have told you what tears my heart to come over?—because I wish to save you, who showed me kindness, from what I have gone through. It's the only good I can do you, and, indeed, it's long since I cared to do good. Never trust a drinking man; he has no guard on his words, and will say that of his nearest friend, that would destroy him soul and body. His breath is hot as the breath of the plague; his tongue is a foolish, as well as a fiery serpent. Ellen, let no drunkard become your lover, and don't trust to promise; try them, prove them all, before you marry."

"Ellen, that's enough," interrupted Larry. "I have heard enough—the two proofs are enough without words. Now, hear me. What length of punishment am I to have? I won't