

NELLY'S DARK DAYS.

By the Author of "Lost in London."

CHAPTER II.

LOCKED OUT.

THE figure which staggered on before them had once been that of a tall, well built man, strong and upright, with a firm tread and a steady hand. Bessie had known him in his better days, but such as he was now—feeble and bent, with reddened eyes and shaking hands—Nelly had never known him otherwise. Rodney loved Nelly with all that was left to him of a heart. It was perhaps the last link which bound him in nature to God and his fellow-men. She was his latest-born, and the only child remaining to him; and though he had lost the sense of all other affections, this one still glimmered and lived within him. Such as he was now he was sure of her love for him, for she could not compare him with any better self in happier times. The state to which he had reduced himself was the only one she knew; and the drunkard felt that there was no reproach mingled with the little child's kisses upon his parched lips.

Rodney floundered on through the narrow streets leading homewards, unconscious that he was followed by the silent and noiseless girls, whose ill-shod feet made no sound upon the slushy pavement. His progress was slow and uncertain; but at length he turned down a short passage, and paused, with labouring breath, at the foot of a flight of stone steps leading to the upper flat of the building in which he lived. It was to see him safe up this perilous staircase that Bessie had come so far out of her own way. A false-step here, or a giddy lurch, might be death to him. They ventured nearer to him between the dark and narrow walls as he climbed up before them; and as soon as he reached the landing, upon which several doors opened, their hearts were at rest, now all danger was over. He groped his way on from door to door until he gained his own, and then with an unexpected quickness and steadiness of hand, he lifted the latch and passed in, slamming the door behind him, and turning the key noisily in the lock. Nelly sprang forward with a sudden cry.

"Oh! Bessie," she cried, wringing her small hands in distress, "whatever are I to do? When father's like that I durstn't let him see me nor hear me, for mother says maybe he'd kill me. And mother durstn't stir to open the door or he'd nearly kill her. And it's so cold out here, and all the neighbours gone to bed, and it 'ud kill me to stay out of doors all night, wouldn't it, Bessie? What-
ever are I to do?"

It was too dark for Bessie to see the terror upon the child's wan face, but she could hear it in her voice, and she could feel the little creature trembling and shivering beside her.

"Never mind," she said, soothingly, "I'm not afraid of him. He's a kind man, and he'll open the door for me, I know; or else you shall come home with me, Nelly, and I'll carry you all the way. Hegg! Mr. Rodney, sir, please to open the door again."

She knocked sharply and decisively at the door, and called out in a shrill voice, which made itself heard through all the din he was making inside. He was silent for a moment, listening, and Bessie went on in the same clear tones,

"You've locked Nelly out, Mr. Rodney, as has been waiting and watching ever so long for you; and it's bitter cold to-night, and she's tired to death. Please unfasten the door and I'll bring her in."

There was no sound for a minute or so except the hollow and suppressed cough of the mother, who was struggling to hush the noise she made, lest it should arouse the drunken fury of her husband. Then Rodney shouted with an oath that he would not open the door again that night for any one.

"It's me, father!" sobbed the child, "little Nelly, and it's snowing out here. You didn't use to be so bad to me. Please to let me in."

She was beating now with both hands on the

door, and crying aloud with cold and terror, while her mother's low cough sounded faintly within; but she dare not rise from her bed and open the door for her little girl.

"I'll teach you to come waiting and watching for me," cried Rodney, savagely; "get off from there, and be quiet, or I'll break every bone in your body. Now, I've said it!"

Nelly's hands dropped down, and she crouched upon the door-sill in silent agony; but Bessie knocked again bravely.

"Never you mind, Mrs. Rodney," she said, "I'll take Nelly home with me, and carry her every inch of the road. And, Mr. Rodney, sir, you'll be sorry as sorry can be as soon as you come to yourself. Good night, now; and don't you fret. Nelly's here, up in my arms, safe and sound; and I'll take care of her."

Bessie had lifted the child into her arms, but still lingered in the hope that the door would open. But it did not; and turning away with a sorrowful and heavy heart, and with Nelly sobbing herself to sleep on her bosom, she made her way toilsomely along, under her burden, and through the thickening snow, to her own poor lodging.

MORNING FEARS.

When Rodney awoke in the morning, he had a vague remembrance of the night before, which made him raise his aching head, and look with a sharp prick of anxiety to see if his little child was in bed beside her mother. His wife, who had been lying awake all night, had now fallen into a profound slumber, and her hollow face, with the skin drawn tightly across it, and with a hectic flush upon her cheeks, was turned toward him; but Nelly was not there. What was it he had done the night before? In his dull and clouded mind there was a dawning recollection of having heard little hands beat against the door, and a piteous voice call to him to open it. It was quite impossible that the child could be concealed in the room, for it was very bare of furniture, and there was no corner in its narrow space where she could hide.

Through the broken panes of the uncurtained window he could see the snow lying thickly upon the roofs; and he was himself benumbed by the biting breath of the frost, which found its way, in rime and fog, through the crazy casement. Could it by any possibility have happened that he had driven out his little daughter, Nelly, who did not shrink from kissing and fondling him yet, drunkard as he was, into the deadly cold of such a winter's night? He crept quietly across the room, and unlocked the door, letting in a keener draft of the bitter wind as he opened it. His wife moved restlessly in her sleep, and began to cough a little. He drew the door behind him, and stood looking down over the railings which protected the gallery upon which the houses opened, into the street below. The snow that had fallen during the darkness was already trodden and sullied by many footsteps; but wherever the northern wind had blown it had drifted into every cranny and crevice, in pure white streaks. A few boys were snow-balling one another along the street; but all the house doors, which usually stood open, were closed, and the neighbours were keeping within. If any of them had been open he could have asked carelessly if they knew where his Nelly could be; but he did not like to knock formally at any one of them. In which of the houses at hand could he enquire for her, without exposing himself to the anger and contempt of the inhabitants?

He could not make up his mind to enquire anywhere. He was afraid of almost any answer he could get. More than once he had beaten his little girl; but they had made it up again, he and Nelly, with many tears and kisses, and he knew she had borne no malice in her heart against him. But he had never driven her out of her home before—a little creature, not eight years old, in the wild, wintery night; at midnight too, when every other shelter would be closed. Where could she be at this moment? What if she had been frozen to death in some corner where she had tried to shield herself from the snow-storm? He wandered along the street, casting fearful glances down each

flight of cellar steps, where a child might creep for refuge, until he reached the wider thoroughfares, and the numerous gin-palaces in them.

But just now Rodney's heart was too full of his missing child to feel the temptation strongly. He fumbled mechanically in his pocket for any odd pence that might be there; but he was thinking too much of Nelly to have more than a faint, instinctive desire for the stimulus. He was cold, miserable, and downcast; but he had not as yet sunk so low that anything except the assurance that his little daughter was alive and well, could revive him. With bowed head he went on in a blind search for her, along the snowy streets, looking under archways, and up covered passages, wherever she might have found a shelter for the little face and form, which were dearer than all the world to him, cruel as he had been to them.

He turned home again at length, worn out and despondent, wishing himself dead and forgotten by all those whom he had made miserable, and more than half tempted to make an end of it altogether in the great, strong river, whose tide would sweep him out to sea. Swept away from the face of the earth—that would be the best thing for them and for him! If he only had courage to do it; but his courage was all gone, had oozed away from him, and left him only the husk of a man, fearful of his own shadow, except when he was drunk. He scarcely knew whether he trembled from cold or dread as he loitered homewards; and he could hardly climb the worn steps which he must ascend to reach his house, for the throbbing of his heart and the tremor in his limbs. He was afraid of facing his dying wife and telling her that he could not find their last little child, the only one that she would have had to leave behind her.

But as he came within sight of the door, he saw that it stood open an inch or two, and his eye caught the gleam of a handful of fire kindled in the grate. Before his hand could touch it, the door was quickly but quietly opened, and Nelly herself stood within, her hand raised to warn him not to make any noise.

"Hush!" she whispered, "mother's asleep still, and you're yourself again. Bessie said you'd be yourself again, and I needn't be afraid. Come in and let me warm you, daddy."

She drew him gently to the broken chair on the hearth, and began to rub his numbed fingers between her own little hands; while Rodney sank helplessly into the seat, and leaned his head upon her small shoulder.

"Never mind, father," said Nelly, "you didn't mean to do it. Bessie says you'd never have done it of your own self. It's only the drink that does it; and I wasn't hurt, daddy; not hurt a bit. Bessie carried me all the way to her home, like you carried her once, she says. Did you ever carry Bessie, when you were a strong man, in your own arms, a long, long way?"

"Ay! I did," said Rodney, with a heavy sigh, "and now I can scarcely lift you upon my knee. Do you love your poor, old father, Nelly?"

"To be sure I do," said the child earnestly, "why, when mother's dead, there'll be nobody left but me to take care of you, you know. You mustn't ever turn me out of doors then, or you might hurt yourself, and there'd be nobody to see when you're drunk."

"I'll never get drunk again," cried Rodney, "and I'll never be cruel to you again, Nelly. Give me a kiss, and let it be a bargain."

Nelly covered his fevered face with kisses, in all a child's hopefulness and gladness; and told her mother the good news the moment she awoke. But neither the wife, nor Rodney himself, dared to believe he would have strength to keep the promise he made.

(To be continued.)

AN Irishman who had a pig in his possession was observed to adopt the constant practice of filling it to repletion one day and starving it the next. On being asked his reason for doing so, he replied, "Och, sure, and isn't it that I like to have bacon weth a strake o' fat and a strake o' laue aqually, one after t'other."