

Tales and Sketches.

THE SON OF MY FRIEND.

An O'er True Talo.

BY T. S. ARTHUR.

"I've been thinking," said I, speaking to my husband, who stood drawing on his gloves.

"Have you?" he answered; "then give me the benefit of your thoughts."

"That we shall have to give a party. You know we have accepted a number of invitations this winter, and it's but right that we should contribute our share of social entertainment."

"I have thought as much myself," was his reply, "and so far we stand agreed. But as I am very busy just now, the heaviest part of the burden will fall on you."

"There is a way of making it light, you know," I returned.

"How?" he queried.

"By employing a professional caterer. He will supply everything for the table, and furnish waiters. We will have nothing to do but receive our guests."

My husband shrugged his shoulders and smiled, as he said, "What will it cost?"

"Almost anything we please. But the size of the company will have the most to do with that."

"Say we invite one hundred."

"Then we can make the cost range anywhere between three hundred dollars and a thousand."

"A large sum to throw away on a single evening's entertainment of our friends. I am very sure I could put it to a better use."

"Very likely," I answered. "Still, we cannot well help ourselves. Unless we give a party, we shall have to decline invitations in future. But there is no obligation resting on us to make it sensational. Let the Hardings and Marygolds emulate extravagance in this line; we must be content with a fair entertainment; and no friend worth the name will have any the less respect for us."

"All that is a question of money and good fame," said my husband, his voice falling into a more serious tone. "I can make it three, five, or ten hundred dollars, and forget all about the cost in a week. But the wine and the brandy will not sit so easily on my conscience."

A slight but sudden chill went through my nerves.

"If we could only throw them out."

"There is no substitute," replied my husband, "that people in our circle would accept. If we serve coffee, tea, and chocolate instead, we would be laughed at."

"Not by the fathers and mothers, I think. At least not by those who have grown-up sons," I returned. "Only last week I heard Mrs. Gordon say that cards for a party always gave her a fit of low spirits. She has three sons, you know."

"Rather fast young men, as the phrase is. I've noticed them in supper-rooms, this winter, several times—a little too free with the wine."

We both stood silent for the space of nearly a minute.

"Well, Agnes," said my husband, breaking the silence, "how are we to decide this matter?"

"We must give a party, or decline invitations in future," I replied.

"Which shall it be?" His eyes looked steadily into mine. I saw that the thing troubled him.

"Turn it in your thoughts during the day, and we'll talk it over this evening," said I.

After tea, my husband said, laying down the newspaper he had been reading, and looking at me across the centre-table, "What about the party, Agnes?"

"We shall have to give it, I suppose." We must drop out of the fashionable circle in which I desired to remain, or do our part in it. I had thought it all over, looking at the dark side, and at the bright side, and settled the question. I had my weakness as well as others. There was a social *et al* in a party, and I wanted my share.

"Wine, and brandy, and all?" said my husband.

"We cannot help ourselves. It is the custom of society; and society is responsible, not we."

"There is such a thing as individual responsibility," returned my husband. "As to social responsibility, it is an intangible thing—very well to talk about, but reached by no law, either of conscience or the statute-book. You, and I, and every other living soul must answer to God for what we do. No custom or law of society will save us from the consequences of our own acts. So far we stand alone."

"But if society bind us to a certain line of action, what are we to do? Ignore society?"

"If we must ignore society or conscience, what then?"

His calm eyes were on my face. "I'm afraid," said I, "that you are magnifying this thing into an undue importance."

He sighed heavily, and dropped his eyes away from mine. I watched his countenance, and saw the shadows of uneasy thought gathering about his lips and forehead.

"It is always best," he remarked, "to consider the probable consequences of what we intend doing. If we give this party, one thing is certain.

"What?"

"That boys and young men, some of them already in the ways that lead to drunkenness and ruin, will be enticed to drink. We will put temptation to their lips, and smilingly invite them to taste its dangerous sweets. By our example, we will make drinking respectable. If we serve wine and brandy to our guests, young and old, male and female, what do we do less than any dram-seller in the town? Shall we condemn him, and ourselves be blameless? Do we call his trade a social evil of the direst character, and yet ply our guests with the same tempting stimulants that his wretched customers crowd his bar-room to obtain?"

I was borne down by the weight of what my husband said. I saw the evil that was involved in this social use of wines and liquors which he so strongly condemned. But, alas that I must say it! neither principle nor conscience were strong enough to overcome my weak desire to keep in good standing with my fashionable friends. I wanted to give a party, I felt that I must give a party. Gladly would I have dispensed with liquor; but I had not the courage to depart from the regular order of things. So I decided to give the party.

"Very well, Agnes," said my husband, when the final decision was made. "If the thing has to be done, let it be well and liberally done."

I had a very dear friend, a Mrs. Martindale. As school girls, we were warmly attached to each other, and as we grew older our friendship became closer and tenderer. Marriage, that separates so many, did not separate us. Our lots were cast in the same city and in the same social circle. She had an only son, a young man of fine intellect and much promise, in whom her life seemed bound up. He went into the army at an early period of the war, and held the rank of second lieutenant, conducting himself bravely. A slight but disabling wound sent him home a short time previous to the surrender of Lee, and, before he was well enough to join his regiment, it was mustered out of service.

Alfred Martindale left his home, as did thousands of other young men, with his blood untouched by the fire of alcohol, and returned from the war, as thousands of other young men returned, with its subtle poison in all his veins.

The dread of this very thing had haunted his mother during all the years of his absence in the army.

"O Agnes!" she had often said to me, with eyes full of tears, "it is not the dread of his death that troubles me most. I have tried to adjust that sad event between myself and God. In our fearful crisis, he belongs to his country. I could not withhold him, though my heart seemed breaking when I let him go. I live in the daily anticipation of a telegram announcing death or a terrible wound. Yet that is not the thing of fear I dread; but something worse—his moral defection. I would rather he fell in battle than come home to me with manhood wrecked. What I most dread is intemperance. There is so much drinking among officers. It is the curse of our army. I pray that he may escape, yet weep, and tremble, and fear while I pray. O my friend! I think his fall into this terrible vice would kill me."

Alas for my friend! Her son came home to her with tainted breath and fevered blood. It did not kill her. Love held her above despair, and gave her heart a new vitality. She must be a saviour, not a weak mourner over wrecked hopes.

With what a loving care and wise discretion did she set herself to work to withdraw her son from the dangerous path in which his feet were walking! And she would have been successful but for one thing. The customs of society were against her. She could not keep him away from the parties and evening entertainments of her friends; and here all the good resolutions she had led him to make were as flax fibres in the flame of a candle. He had no strength to resist when wine sparkled and flashed all around him, and bright eyes and ruby lips invited him to drink. It takes more than ordinary firmness of principle to abstain in a fashionable company of ladies and gentlemen where wine and brandy flow as water. In the case of Alfred Martindale, two things were against him. He was not strong enough to set himself against any tide of custom, in the first place; and, in the second, he had the allurements of appetite.

I knew all this when, with my own hand, I wrote on one of our cards of invitation, "Mr. and Mrs. Martindale and family," but did not think of it until the card was written. As I laid it aside with the rest, the truth flashed on me, and sent a thrill of pain along every nerve. My heart grew sick and my head faint, as thoughts of the evil that might come to the son of my friend, in consequence of the temptation I was about to throw in his way, rushed through my mind. My first idea was to recall the card, and I lifted it from the table with a half-formed resolution to destroy it. But a