

Tales and Sketches.

THE BURNISH FAMILY.

A PRIZE STORY PUBLISHED BY THE SCOTTISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE.

CHAPTER II.

A Week at Home, and its Results.

"I will not do it,
Lest I surcease to honor mine own truth,
And teach my soul some most inherent baseness."

SHAKESPEARE.

Death brings stillness into most dwellings; not so in this. Calm and quietude were things unknown in Racket Row. Had Mr. Alterton supposed, at the commencement of his wife's illness, that it would so soon have ended fatally, he would have taken, as was his wont every summer, a country house, and moved her to it. But Mrs. Alterton had long been one of those invalids subject to the frequent and violent attacks of some mysterious malady, from which she often as rapidly recovered; and a usual consequence was, that the family, amid their sympathy, ceased to feel any very great alarm on her account. Her illness went by the comprehensive name of "spasms," and Susan, ever voluble, stopped in her weeping for the dead, to assure Mabel that everything had been tried for her relief; and certainly, if doctors and doses, and light wine to thin the blood, and rich cordials to invigorate the system, and spirits to promote circulation, and beer to give a tone, and compounds to produce local benefit, could each in turn or altogether have eradicated these spasms, Mrs. Alterton would not have gone to the grave the victim of disease—or remedies.

"Did she ever try doing without these stimulants?" said Mabel to Susan during the first strange Sabbath morning at home.

"No, indeed, Miss, or she'd a been dead many a year ago. She was kep alive by these yer little comforts; and I will say this, master, thof he's queesy hisself, and takes next to none, he never begrudged missus; and he oft not, for the consarn was her'n!"

"You lived with my mother—with Mrs. Alterton when she was Mrs. Horncastle, Susan?"

"Oh, and afore that, Miss, when she were Mrs. Swift. Why, I mind when missus's mother, widder Blythe, used to keep this place; it was a brisk trade, rayther low, only a public house then. She died, and left two darters, one a baby, born four months after Mr. Blythe's death. Miss Jane was seventeen, and married Swift, partly to please her mother, who, when she was a-dying, wanted to leave her darter with a purteckter—and a pretty purteckter he proved. Why, he drank hisself mad in less than two year. Not but what he were fond of missus; but he couldn't carry his drink somehow. Ah, this house was gay, and no mistake, while missus was a widder the first time! Poor dear! If you'd a seen her in her widder's cap! Why, when she was in the bar, there was a scramble just to see her. And then, to think of her a-marrying that Horncastle—deary me!"

"Was she unhappy then?"

"Never one bit of peace for twelve year. All the work her'n, all the play his'n. And a big brute he was into the bargain."

Mabel had certainly a desire to hear how her father became acquainted with her stepmother, but she shrank from obtaining that knowledge of a chattering servant, whose breath betrayed the source of her volubility; though Susan prided herself greatly on her sobriety, and had a great contempt for drunkards. She understood the art of "carrying the drink," which is in some creeds equivalent to solriety. Mabel turned the tide of her remarks into a new channel, by asking for the information about Annie, which the dying woman said Susan would give.

It was a common, but none the less sad, story, that in Susan's coarse language was told to Mabel. A young girl had grown from childhood to womanhood in that place. Her beauty became a srare to others and to herself. The *roues* who frequented the adjacent theatres, the spendthrifts who lived in the rules of the bench, all toasted "the pretty barmaid of Racket Row." Many were the shop lads who dated their ruin from the day they took the drams her fair hands served out. For a time her sister's vigilance, and her own sense, for she was not ill disposed, triumphed over the dangers of her situation. But soon her own heart played her false, and she yielded to the wiles of a gentlemanly seducer, who lured her from her home with a well contrived story, which the poor girl unhappily believed; and from that time, now seven years past, except the letter mentioned by Mrs. Alterton, no tidings had been heard of her, though every effort had been made to discover her.

It seemed very unlikely that this poor wanderer would ever return. But to Mrs. Alterton's disordered brain the thought of Mabel preserved from the contagion of home, was ever present, accompanied by the secret consciousness that the young girl had profited by her advantages, in character as well as in acquirements; and the feelings of envy with which she had regarded her, faded away as the approach of death was felt, like streams absorbed in a rapid river. To see Mabel, to arouse her compassion for

Annie, to obtain a promise from her relative to her sister's prospects became hourly more and more ardently desired. The constant fever of her spirits, kept up by stimulants, added to the excitement, until in her paroxysms Mabel's name called and shrieked was so painfully frequent that Mr. Alterton, in the main an easy good natured man, had no alternative but to send for his daughter, though to keep her from that home had been the strongest purpose of his life. He said rigidly, nothing but a matter of life and death should have made him break through the plan adopted when Mabel was but six years old, and that had been persevered in for twelve years, and grown more confirmed the longer it had been carried out.

No person ever can deceive us more effectually than we can deceive ourselves. Mr. Alterton considered himself a pattern father. Mabel was the child of his affections. His union with her mother had been as happy as it was brief. When death deprived him of the wife of his youth, he vowed in his anguish to live for the sake of the feeble infant left to his care. He was poor—a clerk in a distillery. To provide for himself and child—the latter at nurse in a village near London—was no easy task. When Mabel was five years old, Alterton, in the course of his business pursuits became acquainted with Mrs. Horncastle, then newly a widow. Her husband, who by the general voice was called a ruffian, had been accidentally killed in a brawl that took place on his return from Epsom Races. His affairs were left in a very disordered state. Alterton made himself useful in his evenings in putting the books in'o order. He was a sober man—a water drinker as a matter of diet—not principle—and this, it might be, added to the recommendation of a good presence, won him the favor of the widow. Whether he was the wooer or the wooed, was a problem he never cared to solve. Certain it is, his chief thought on entering into a marriage with Mrs. Horncastle was Mabel's advantage, and the only stipulation he made was that his child should be brought up away from home, and in ignorance as far as might be of the business. He thought at first that a few years would realize an independence, for the trade was flourishing; but he found that the habits of the family were extravagant beyond all his former ideas. His wife had a passion for dress, and resolved to gratify it. Her boys were spendthrifts from their cradle, and their education at an expensive school was so often broken in upon by their mother bringing them home for treats, that Alterton, unwilling to interfere, and often feeling himself an interloper, was content to carry out his own plans, and to leave his wife free to follow hers. There were occasional altercations about Mabel—little angry squibs, that fizzed and went out—for she was so different from the young Horncastles, that the mother was constrained to see, if she would not own, the superiority. Liberal as Mabel's education had been, it was economical compared with that of the boys, who were certainly ingenious in one particular—the act of resisting instruction, that is, in anything worth knowing. It never entered into Mr. Alterton's head to doubt that he was other than the most virtuous husband and father. He never interfered with his wife or her sons, and he put his daughter out of harm's way; a measure that was doubly important in his eyes, when Annie, whom he both liked and admired, threw the whole house into consternation by her flight. He never dreamed of his business being in fault. He conducted his house well; the neighborhood was low, and he did the best he could. How could he help people being quarrelsome over their cups? What was that to him? "As long as gin-shops were gin-shops," he often said, "rows there always had been, and rows there always would be;" a kind of logic that convinced himself. He had introduced many reforms. His wife had never appeared at the bar since she bore his name. And when Annie's affair occurred, he cashiered the two ringletted and ribboned young ladies, who had been her attendant sylphs, and installed men in their places. And Mr. Henry Crumple, the tragedian, who was nightly murdered or murdering at the neighboring theatre for the edification of youth, said, in his usually fine style, as he took his morning dram on his way to rehearsal—"Alterton, I honor you, sir! I'm a family man; Blanche and Fanny, twin roses, flowering on one stem, adorn my household tree, and I would not yield a breath of them to scent the most imploring air." This testimony to his virtues was grateful to Mr. Alterton, for he had a great opinion of Mr. Henry Crumple, who was the nephew of the great J. P. Crumple, and the greater Mrs. Gliddons, and was now drinking and ranting himself to death in honor of the genius of the family; a specimen of the well-known tribe of men who are said to be no one's enemy but their own.

So it happened that when Mabel met her father on the noon of that Sabbath-day, his sorrow for the loss of his wife was in no way increased by any misgiving as to his own performance of his duties. "Poor thing, poor thing!" he said, as he kissed his daughter's cheek, and made her sit down beside him on a sofa in his showy drawing-room. "I always did my best to make her life easy and happy. She had her trials with that wretch Horncastle. Twelve of the best years of her life, from twenty-two to thirty-four, made miserable; and Frank and Tom have not been all square—take after their father, I fear; but I did not think death was so near."

At this instant there was a sound below as of a bolt withdrawing, and a crowd rushing in.

"What is that?" said Mabel, startled, the scene of last night dawning into her mind.