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## THE RECONCILIATION:

A STORY FROM REAL LIFE,

By Old Nicholas.

"Will you give me a penny, sir?" said a ragged boy, as I passed the step of a door on which he was sitting.

There was something so unbeggarly in the tone and manner of the supplicant, that I stopped.

"Yes," said I, and took one from my pocket.

I looked the child in the face; there was a degree of intelligence that commanded attention; an expression, too, that for a moment I fancied I had seen before.

As I put the money into his hand I asked him where he lived.

"In a court over the bridge," he replied.

"With your mother?"

"Yes, sir; and father and sisters."

I beckoned him from the main street to learn more. In a few minutes I heard enough to determine me on accompanying him home. We crossed Blackfriars' Bridge, and, after winding through several courts and alleys, on the Surrey side, and close by the river, we stopped at a small hovel, which appeared fit only for the abode of wretchedness and misery.

The child pushed the door open, and we entered. In the centre of the floor, upon what appeared to be the remains of a piece of matting, sat a young woman of apparently five or six and twenty. In her arms was an infant of very tender age; two or three little ones were huddled together in a corner, whose crying my appearance partially hushed.

Their mother raised her head from the baby as I approached her. I apologised for the liberty I had taken in intruding upon her sorrows. She answered not, but burst into tears. I offered her my arm to raise her from the floor, and looked round, but in vain for a chair or a stool,—the walls were bare. She was too weak to stand. I stepped into the adjoining tenement, could not call it,—and putting down half a crown on the table, begged the loan of an old chair, that was the only furniture of one side of the apartment.

When the poor creature was seated, I asked in what way I could best serve her.

"Oh, sir!" she replied, "food—food for my poor little ones!"

I gave the little fellow who had been my conductor money, and bade him get some meat and bread. In an instant he was out of sight. I comforted as well as I was able the apparently dying woman; told her the accident that had brought me to her, and promised the little assistance that might be in my power. She would have spoken her thanks, but her strength was exhausted with the few words she had already uttered. The children, encouraged by the kind tone of voice in which I spoke, now one by one stole from their corner, and came round me. They would have been fine healthy creatures, if misery had not "marked them for her own;" but the cheek was hollow, the eye sunken, the lip thin and livid. Hunger was fast consuming them. As I looked upon them my heart sank within me, and I could not drive back the tears that forced themselves into my eyes. They fell upon the forehead of the tallest of the group; she looked up, and seeing me weep, asked most piteously,

"Are you hungry, sir, too?"

"Poor child! with her, hunger had ever been associated with tears; the sight of them put the question into her mouth."

"No," said I; "I am not hungry; but you are, and shall soon be fed."

"And me?"—"And me?"—"And me?" exclaimed the others; their eyes glistening as they spoke.

"Yes, all of you!" I answered.

Some time had now elapsed, and my little messenger did not make his appearance. I grew impatient; for they needed more substantial comfort than words. I moved to the door to look for him. Taking a few steps up the court, I found him leaning against the wall, and crying bitterly: on seeing me he hid his face in his hands.

"What is the matter?" said I; "and where is the money I gave you?"

"Father saw me, and took it away," sobbed he, "just as I was going into the baker's shop."

"Where is your father?" I asked.

"Over in the public-house," he continued, "tipsy; and, because I cried, he beat me;" and here the poor little fellow, putting down his hands, showed me his eye most frightfully cut.

My first impulse was to go over to the public-house; but, reflecting for an instant on the state of those I had just left, I im-

mediately went myself and purchased such ready-dressed food as I thought would suffice for a good meal; and then, having had the child's wound properly attended to, I returned to enjoy the luxury of seeing this starving family comparatively happy and comfortable. When I took my departure I left what money I had about me, and promised to renew my visit before it should be exhausted.

It was my intention to have gone in a day or two; but the following circumstance prevented my doing so for a whole week.

On the next morning early I was sent for by an old gentleman with whom I was on terms of great intimacy, although our acquaintance was not of long standing. He was extremely ill, and wished to make a disposition of his property. I took a pen, and waited for his instructions.

"I give and bequeath," said the invalid, "all monies, houses, lands, and whatsoever else I may die possessed of, to—" He paused, as if considering. Suddenly his countenance indicated a strong internal struggle, as if bitter recollections came upon him, which he was determined to discard. I put down my pen.

"Go on, sir! go on!" said he, hurriedly. "To—to Henry Masters—"

I started with astonishment. It was my own name.

"You cannot mean this, sir!" said I. "I have no claim upon you to such an extent. I—"

"To Henry Masters," he repeated slowly and distinctly.

I approached his pillow. "My dear friend, I have heard that you have a child. Ought not—"

He put his hand upon my arm. "Child! Oh yes! I know it; but I had forgotten it until this hour. For years I have forgotten it! Why think of it now? I will not think of it!" he exclaimed violently; then falling back, and exerting extraordinary self-control, he again repeated more decisively than before, "to Henry Masters."

I could not bear to write down words that would shut out a child for ever without an other effort: I commenced in a persuasive manner; but he instantly interrupted me; and his look and tone I shall not readily forget.

"Sir," said he, "I made up my mind on the most important part of this matter years ago, when I had health, and strength, and intellect about me. It is not honest to try and make me waver now that I am an imbecile old man."

I could say no more. He again repeated his instructions, and I reluctantly obeyed them.

For some days I was his constant attendant; indeed I scarcely ever left his bed-side. Occasionally his mind wandered, then his mutterings—for they were little better—had evidently connection with his last rational conversation—the disposition of his property. Bitter exclamations about his child—his daughter, plainly showed that, though disowned, she was not, and could not be forgotten. Once or twice he became calm and perfectly collected, and on each opportunity I endeavoured to bring him to a reconsideration of the step he had taken; but in vain. It was the only subject upon which he would not hear me. I learned from the physician in attendance that his recovery was perfectly hopeless; but that he might linger some little time. I longed to see my poor dependants again, and, one morning when my patient had fallen into a deep slumber, I took my hat, and, quietly stealing from the chamber, directed my footsteps to their abode. The family were in a state little better than when I first saw them. The woman's husband, a reckless and inveterate drunkard, judging from the food he found at home that from some quarter or other, assistance had been given, forced the fact from his trembling partner, and then nearly the whole of the little money I had left behind; since which violence he had not returned. Again I supplied the poor creatures with refreshment, and attempted to soothe the only one whom food could not alone satisfy—the heart-broken mother.

She briefly told me her story. It was indeed a piteous one.

She was well connected; and, at the time of her marriage, living with her parents in comfort and affluence in New York. They wished her to connect herself with a man with whom she felt she never could be happy, and she refused. She was secretly plighted to another,—secretly, for he was forbidden even her father's house. Her father commanded, her mother persuaded; but it was in vain. Her's was a passion that neither threat nor argument could weaken. She married, and was renounced, they told her, for ever! She turned to the chosen of her heart; and though the daughter wept, the wife triumphed! But, alas! she leant upon a broken reed. Her love had glossed over faults—nay, vices—which calmer judges had detected, and she had fancied

perfection where all was frail. Her husband cruelly neglected her; she was a married widow! Children came about her; they were fatherless! Her mother tenderly loved her, and this wretchedness broke her heart! Her father was of sterner stuff. In the loss of his own partner, he said, a murder had been committed, and he doubly steeled himself against its unnatural author. Then it was that in utter despair she left her country, long urged to the step by her husband, who said he could get employment here; and who solemnly promised that in a new land he would lead another life; and that, once removed from his haunts of ruin and dissipation, he would forswear them for ever, and strive to keep holy the sacred vow which bound him to "forsake all others, and cling only unto her."

On his arrival in England he succeeded in obtaining a lucrative situation, and for a brief period all was well; but soon the demon, Drunkenness, again laid hold upon him, and he was lost for ever.

Friendless, and alone, she struggled against the stream of adversity; her health and strength soon failed her, and she fell into utter destitution,—in utter destitution I had indeed found her!

This was a slight outline of her sad history. At its conclusion she burst into a violent paroxysm of tears. In such moments words of consolation are but caustics, keeping open wounds they cannot cure: I attempted them not. The violence of this fit had in some degree exhausted itself, and I was about to speak of doing something for her children, when a knocking at the door, accompanied by several voices talking in a suppressed tone, made me start from my seat. I undid the latch, and three men entered, bearing in their arms a fourth in a senseless state.

They laid the burthen on the floor with but little ceremony, and would have departed without a word.

"Stay," said I, seizing the arm of one of the party. "Who this, and what is the matter?"

"It is my husband," my poor, abandoned, wretched wife, springing forward.

"Yes; and drunk as usual!" added the man in a brutal manner as he slammed the door after him.

I cast but one look at the face of the lost being at my feet. It was enough: distortion was in every feature!

"For pity's sake!" said I, pursuing and coming up with the party who had just left us, "fetch me a medical man. Here is money; and I will pay you better by and by."

Money made them Samaritans—they hurried off to obey me. I returned. On the floor, and in a state of insensibility, lay stretched the long-neglected, degraded husband; and hanging over him in all the agony of doubt and fear, the neglected, long-enduring wife. It was a picture that touched me to the quick.

"Henry! Henry!" she shrieked. "Oh! speak to me! speak! but one word!" But he spoke not; his mouth was frightfully distorted; his lips livid and frothy.

"Look at me!" she continued, pressing his hand; "look at me!" and she spoke with a winning affection of tone and manner, that consciousness could not have withstood; but his ears were sealed, and his eyes full and fixed.

A surgeon now came in; he looked at him, and, having made some inquiries as to the length of time he had been in the state he saw, at once pronounced his fears for the very worst. He immediately bled him in the arm, and as quickly as possible cupped him freely in the neck. During the latter operation his patient showed for an instant some signs of returning feeling, and this, by the look with which he gazed upon his agonised wife. To attempt to describe that look would be attempting that to which no language is equal. I think no pencil could have ever done it, much less a pen. It was one which told that the vision of his past life, concentrated, flashed suddenly before him; a life during which she who was his ministering angel had been a victim to cruelty and neglect: there was an intensity of gaze, too, as if he felt that he was looking his last. It was a lingering spark of affection struggling into light through the dark horrors of remorse. Again and again she breathed comfort and reconciliation into his ear. I know not whether her words reached his heart. I fear that with the exception of that one momentary gleam of reality, there was a prostration of power and intellect which denied him such a blessing. I need not, will not go into fuller detail. He died the same afternoon, some few hours after he had been brought home.

I hired a person to perform the necessary duties of the departed, and to remain with the corpse until I could give orders for its interment. The widow and children I resolved to place with a relative of my own until the funeral should have taken place.