

TOM'S SECOND MISSUS.

BETTY Alty was dying. The neighbors had told her several times of late that they doubted she was goin' a long road, and the lengthening face of Tom, her Gaffer, appeared to endorse their prognostics; but Betty had never believed in her own critical condition until the doctor told her one day that she really was getting to the end of her tether.

"Well," said Betty, with a sigh, "th' A'mighty knows what's best fur us all. He couldn't ha' took me at a time when I'd ha' felt myself more ready to goo."

"Good old Betty!" said the doctor admiringly.

"Ah," continued Betty, "pig's killed, yo' see, an' chickens is pretty nigh grown, and taters 'll be got in a two-three days. There's nought mich left as wants seein' to. If it weren't fur th' thought o' th' Gaffer I'd be a'most fain to goo—this here cough shakes me to pieces very near—but eh, I cannot think whatever our Tom will do! Eh, doctor, yo'd never think how little sense he has fur a man of his years! He's that careless and foolish-like I welly lose patience wi' him sometimes. Yo'd never think. He'll sit aside o' fire and watch it goin' out, an' never retch out 's and to mend it; an' he'll put blackin' on t'wan boot happen twice ower, an' leave th' t'other dirty, an' walk to church of a Sunday in it wi'out takin' a bit o' notice. An' sleep! Eh dear o' me that mon 'ud sleep I welly believe till just upon dinner-time if I wasn't theer to shake him an' shout in 's ear."

"Poor Tom," said the doctor, laughing and buttoning up his coat, "he'll be in a bad way I'm afraid when you're gone, Betty. He seems to be the kind o' chap that wants a woman to take care of him."

"Eh, he it thot fur sure," agreed the wife sorrowfully. "I dunnot raly know how the Gaffer's to live wi'out no missus."

"Why he must take another missus that's all! If you will follow my advice, Betty, you'll pick out a good one yourself before you go, and then you'll be sure he'll be well looked after."

The doctor buttoned the last button as he spoke and broke into a loud and cheery "Ha, ha." He was a North-countryman, born and bred, and there was an occasional almost brutal frankness in his dealings with his patients. But they, being of the same kidney, liked him none the less for it. Usually a joke like this would have been laughingly applauded; but Betty, struck with the idea, answered in all seriousness:—

"That 'ud be th' best, but I reckon it'll be hard enough to find wan as 'ull do fur him same's me. We mun do the best we can as how it is."

The doctor withdrew, laughing and rolling his shoulders, and Betty, left alone, closed her eyes and fell to planning arrangements for her own funeral. Her mind, however, again reverted to the less cheerful subject of Tom's future prospects, and her face puckered itself into a thousand doleful wrinkles as she realized the difficulty of providing him with a suitable helpmate.

Presently Tom himself entered the adjoining room—Betty's bed had been "shifted" to the parlor since her last attack, as she found a difficulty in getting up and down stairs, and besides she could thus more conveniently superintend Tom's operations in the kitchen. She heard him poking up the fire now, and filling the kettle; then the thump, thump of his clogs as he kicked them off on the floor; finally he opened the door and came in. He was an under-sized, stout little man, with a ruddy, comical face, every feature of which seemed to turn up; even his eyebrows appeared to be climbing up his

forehead, as though desirous of taking possession of the top of his head, which, indeed, sorely needed hirsute adornment.

He advanced slowly to his wife's bedside, contemplating her anxiously the while.

"How doesto find thyself now?" he asked.

Betty's face assumed a certain melancholy importance.

"Doctor says I'm not long for this world, Tom, he does indeed. 'Yo're very near th' end o' yo're tether, Betty,' says he; so theer in't mich time to be lost i' geting ready, thou sees."

"Eh," said Tom, eying her very solemnly indeed. "Eh, Betty, I'm—I'm sorry, I am that."

"Well, said Betty, with a superior air, "we's all ha' to goo when we're time cooms. I allus thought yo'd be first, Tom, an' I'd planned to gi' yo' a nice funeral. But theer, it isn't the Lord's will. Thou'lt see as I'm laid out seemly—the best sheets is yonder o' th' top shelf o' th' cupboard, an' I'd like to weer my little cap wi' th' lace borders. Yo' can boil th' big ham, an' have a nice bit o' cheese an' that, but no beer. Nay, I wunnot ha' no drinkin' at my buryin', an' so I tell thee."

"Well," said Tom, thoughtfully scraping his chin with his big fore-finger, "I doubt folks 'll be a bit disapp'inted like; they allus look fur a drop o' summat—especially them as carry the coffin, thou knows. I'd be loth to vex thee, but still I'd like everything gradely at thy buryin', owd lass."

"Coom," conceded Betty, somewhat mollified, "thou can give bearers a mug each if thou likes then, but t'other folk mun do wi' coffee, an' thou'd happen best stick to coffee thyself; 'Tud never do fur thee to fuddle thyself on such a 'casion."

Tom looked a little blank, but he wisely forbore to discuss the point, and, after a moment's pause, observed with a deep sigh, "that he doubted if he'd 'ave mich 'eart for coffee at such a time."

"Whatever mun I do when thou'rt gone, missus, I'm sure I don't know," he added hopefully.

Betty raised herself on her elbow.

"Tom, I've been bethinkin' myself and unbethinkin' myself. Thou'rt noan the mak' o' chap as could get on wi'out a woman to do fur thee."

Why thou 'ud clem sooner nor think o' gettin' thy mate fur thyself, and as fur cleanin' up, thou ud never notice if th' place wur a foot deep in muck. Thou 'ud need a body allus at thy elbow."

"Well," said Tom disconsolately, "I reckon I'll ha' to make shift wi' some mak' o' little lass as 'ull—"

"Little lass," interrupted the old woman indignantly. "That ud be a pretty to do! Set wan child to watch another, Same as blind leadin' blind."

"Ah, but—" interpolated Tom mildly, "theer's none so mich work i' this little cote. Would thou have me pay out wage to a full-grown woman to set twiddlin' her thumbs i' th' ingle-nook wan half o' her time?"

"Did thou ever see me twiddle my thumbs for so mich as a minute, Tummas Alty? Theer's work enough here if it's done as it should be, I can tell thee. Bat I never said thou wast to pay out wage. Nought o' th' kind. Thou mun get wed, mon, as soon as thou con at arter I'm putten under ground. Yigh, thou mun tak' another missus, an' then thou'lt not have to pay naught, and hoo'll happen bring thee a bit o' brass i'stead."

"Eh, Betty!" said the Gaffer, taken aback. "Whatever put sich a notion as that i' thy 'ead? I dunnot want no missuses at all arter thou'rt gone, I'm sure I don't. I'd be a bonny bridegroom, jist upon sixty-four! Eh, the neighbors 'ud think me a grandly fool."

"Nay, nobry'd reckon it'nought but nat'ral—a lone mon same's thee. An' what's sixty-four?"

Didn't owd Ned Turner get wed when he wur seventy-two an' his wife gone twenty? Hoo was his first love, they say, an' kept company wi' him a year and more when they was young folks. Then hoo went to service an' Ned took up with another lass. An' when they coom together again every wan said it was beautiful.

"Coom, if that's all," cried Tom, fire I with a spirit of emulation, "theer was poor Ann Norris as I coorted afore I met thee. Hoo's a widow now, an' childer is all upgrown an' settled. Hoo'd be glad enough, I reckon, if we was to mak' it up again."

"Now that's downreet onlacent on thee, Tummas, to be bringing up Ann Norris to me now as I've wan foot i' th' grave! Thou an' me has had mony a word afore about Ann Norris. A poor sickly, ill-favored body hoo is too, and allus was, an' wan as never was good fur mich at any time. If thou was to wed her you'd both coom to th' Union afore ought was long, fur sure!"

"Well, well, Betty, I did but name her, thou knows. I thought hoo'd happen do fur me as well as another, an' both bein' widowed 'tud ha' seemed more coomfortable like."

"Coomfortable!" ejaculated Betty ironically; "ah! 't 'ud be very coomfortable to hear 't owd body castin' up 'usband to thee fro' morn till neet! Hoo thought the world o' Joe, hoo did—eh, they was a proper pair o' dinnerheads! An hoo'll be casting him up at thee all roads."

"Coom then," said Tom, who was anxious to meet Betty's views if possible, "what says to wan o' Gilbertson's daughters. They'n never been wed nor coorted neither as I've heard on."

"Eh, Tom, Tom! Eh, dear o' me! However wilt o' shift to get along in this world? Poor the oldest o' Gilbertson's lasses is but wan-an-twenty year old."

"Ay, an' a bonny lass too," remarked Tom, with a certain contemplative air; "straight as a dart, and her mother's reet hond they say."

"An' doesto think hoo'll be like to tak' to thee wi' thy bald head an' all? Here the old woman was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing, during which her husband regarded her with an expression of the utmost bewilderment and concern.

"Well, whatever mun I do?" he asked as she sank back exhausted on her pillows. "I'm nob but fur doin' as thou reckons best, thou knows an' I cannot call to mind nobry else as would jus' suit."

"Theer's Margaret Heptonstall, isn't there?" suggested Betty, with an oddly triumphant intonation. "Tom, I tell thee hoo's th' wife fur thee! a staid, sensible, thrifty body, wi' a tidy bit saved. I fancy, Margaret 'ud mak' thee rarely comfortable, Tummas."

Mr. Alty's face did not assume the rapture which might have been expected.

"Hoo's gettin' into years pretty well, isn't hoo?" he asked doubtfully, "an' hoo's a terrible sharp tongue they say."

"No sharper than other folkses," retorted Betty. "If yo' speak civil to Margaret hoo'll speak civil to you. Her and me were allus pretty thick, and I never had nought to complain on. Hoo's a notable body is Margaret, an' who mun be a good ten year younger than thyself, Tom. Eh, I can mind her fire-irons! Last time I went to see her they fair glittered, they did, an' her table was scrubbed till yo' could eat off it, and the tiles o' th' floor, I could welly see myself in em! Hoo'd keep this here parlor nice, fur sure, an' never let a bit o' rust coom nigh the pots an' pans i' th' kitchen as I've allus took sich pride in."

Tom grunted. "Hoo'd do for thee," went on Betty enthusiastically; "eh, dear, its a pleasure to think how coomfortable hoo'd mak' thee."

Tom's countenance still betrayed but moderate satisfaction.