

THE BURNISH FAMILY.

A PRIZE STORY PUBLISHED BY THE SCOTTISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE.

CHAPTER XII.

The Accident Ward.

'As mine own shadow was this child to me—
A second self—far dearer and more fair.
Nor till bereft

Of friends, and overcome by lonely care,
Knew I what solace for that loss was left,
Though by a bitter wound my bursting heart was cleft.'

SHELLEY.

Mabel's walk with Mr. Shafton Keen was performed in silence, except that he said—

'You must screw up your nerves, Miss Alterton. The accident ward of an hospital, in a crowded district, is not a Berlin wool affair, depend on it. And it is not every lady I would venture to take there.'

To this Mabel replied quietly, 'You may depend on me,'—a promise that she made in blessed ignorance of what she had to see.

The building in question once, no doubt, was in the fields, but now a vast network of little streets, thickly populated, spread around in all directions. The accident ward for women, was in the right hand wing, on the ground floor, and, very properly, was entered without delay, or climbing up any stairs. It was a long clean room, not very lofty, with a row of beds on each side, certainly nearer together than was desirable; and yet it seemed, from the nurse's statement, that there were hardly beds enough for the many casualties. When Mabel entered, the first sight that met her eye was a large clothes-horse, drawn as a screen round a bed half-way down the room. At another bed near, she was startled to see two gentlemen and a policeman. They were a magistrate and his clerk, and a witness, taking the depositions of a patient. Was that swollen, battered, livid mass on the pillow—every feature obliterated—a human being? Yes; it was a woman—a young woman, whose drunken husband had trampled her into one huge bruise! It seemed she had an unweaned baby at her home, and her wail for her child was continual. Unhappily the monster had a mother as drunken as himself, to whom he had given the child, and who would not bring it to the sufferer. The poor creature's fever ran very high, so that her life was despaired of. Very little could be got from her but the words—'He was drunk, or he never would have done it. We lived happy till he drank. Oh! where's baby? Let me go—let me go!' Then a pause. 'I hear him crying! I'm coming, my pretty pet, I'm coming!'

With sickening horror, Mabel clung close to Shafton Keen's arm, and passed two beds where children, badly burned, were moaning, as the dressers were attending to their burns.

'What is their ailment,' said Mabel, in her ignorance.

'Drunken mothers, Miss Alterton,' replied Shafton Keen.

Indeed, each bed seemed a little world of misery. There was the broken limb, as often fractured in a brawl as by an accident; the frightful scald to within an inch of life—enough left for suffering and no more. There was the obliterating bruise, the mutilating blow; there was the despondent look of tedious agony, the wild delirious cry of acute misery; the tossing restlessness of creatures new to affliction, the dull despair settling down on those who would rise from the bed of pain no more.

Mabel was bewildered, she had not thought the world contained so much suffering as that one room; and yet she was thankful that there was shelter and needful aid rendered to these wretched beings. Shafton Keen left her for a moment, and went behind the screen that surrounded the patient Mabel had come to visit. He returned saying, 'I fear, I have brought you here in vain, the child is at the point of death.'

'Is the mother here?' said Mabel. He replied in the affirmative.

'Then let me see her.'

Mabel passed with a soft step and deferential mien the slight barrier that hid the death scene from the eyes of the other sufferers. The child, uninjured in the face, lay on the pillow with her eyes closed—pale as the sheets. There was a strife for breath at intervals from the crushed chest, but that was the only motion that broke the marble stillness. It was a fair little face, of five or six years old, with features delicately formed, and thinner than is the wont of childhood, but very beautiful. By the bedside knelt a tall woman in the prime of her years, nearly as pale as the poor innocent; her gleaming hair of a soft golden tint, fell, by its own weight, neglected on her shoulders, and made the face look ghastly in contrast with its brightness. The tearless-strained eyes, slightly bloodshot with the intensity of her watch, were riveted on the child. Her dry and bloodless lips were slightly apart, and seemed, with the rest of the face, to be in a rigour of attention. She took no notice as Mabel stood at the foot of the bed, and Shafton Keen went up the other side and leaned slightly over. All the world, evidently, had at that time ebbed away from her remembrance. That dying child was all that she was conscious of. Instinctively Mabel sank on her knees in that solemn presence, and bowed her head for she felt the angel of death was near. If prayer is sometimes 'the falling of a tear,' she offered many, as with hated breath she continued kneeling.

A slight tremour, as it were, that vibrated through the bed, caused Mabel to lift her face and venture a glance. There was a quiver ran lightly over the placid features, a faint smile parted the lips, and a strong breath rippled forth—and then a silence! The mother had one of the little hands in hers. She noted the movement, and gave a gasp of satisfaction, then continued her gaze. Neither Shafton nor Mabel moved. Neither could have told that mother her child was dead. And so for a few moments they all kept their places Mabel gradually creeping round on her knees nearer the woman. How long the spell that bound them might have lasted it is impossible to say. The nurse put her head within the screen and saw that all was over, came to the side of the bed by Shafton Keen, and laid one dead arm down straight, and proceeded to withdraw the little hand the mother was fondling. The woman, as if struck by a sudden blow, looked wildly and fiercely round, then at the child, and again at the by-standers. She read it all. No need of the nurse's words—"My good soul, all is over." She gave a scream so long and wild, as if her life must have departed in that cry, and would have fallen to the ground, if Mabel's arms had not received her. Her bosom pillowed the frantic head, her tears fell fast on the wasted face. In a few moments, as the nurse proceeded to touch the body, she sprang up, and throwing herself by its side, said, "Let me die. Good people have mercy, and let me die."

"Hush! hush!" said the nurse, and then added to Mr. Shafton Keen, "She must not make a noise here among the patients." To remove her, partly by entreaty and partly by force, was no easy task; and Mabel's work seemed to commence when they got her into a room at the end of the ward. All that could be done and said was tried. She did not shriek again; she had not shed a tear; but kept saying, with a stony glare and a husky voice, "Let me die; pray let me die."

Just at that moment their party was augmented by the arrival of Mr. Delamere Burnish, who was shown by a private passage to the room where his cousin and Miss Alterton were trying to comfort the mourner. He had heard from the nurse that the child was dead. Both the gentlemen, after a pause of a few minutes, thought Mabel might have said more in the way of consolation, and feared her feelings were unfitting her for the task she had undertaken; but Mabel, though new to such scenes, had the reverence for the sanctity of grief which sympathy has a kind of prescience of.

"Tell her, Miss Alterton," said Shafton Keen, "that my aunt will not fail to aid her in any way."

"Tell her all the family feel for her affliction," added Delamere; and thus prompted, contrary to her own judgment, Mabel said—

"I am commissioned to tell you that you will be befriended in this great affliction, by people who deeply feel for you."

"Who talks of befriending me? I want no friends; let me die."

"My mother, Mrs. Burnish," said Delamere, "is very grieved, as we all are, at this sad, sad accident."

"Who?" said the woman, starting, "who did he say?"

"One who is the friend of many," faltered Mabel; Mrs. Burnish."

By this time the woman stood up and confronted them. She gazed from one to another, and then said, "Begone! could you find no time to insult me but this? Begone! what have I to do with the Burnish people? Once, famine-stricken on a winter's night, I fell so low as to ask alms of that cruel woman, and she refused me. Yes, refused that child, I tell you. Stay," she added, a sudden and dreadful thought convulsing her face like a spasm, "Whose carriage was it that—?"

"Don't distress yourself, I pray," said Shafton, afraid of the turn the matter had taken, and wishing to soothe the woman.

"What do you mean by trifling with me? Let me know—was it not? Oh, yes, I see it all. It was their carriage—that family—the curse of my life—my ruin! Man!" she said, coming near to Shafton and grasping his arm, "do you know who that child was? Did you ever hear the name of Boon? Oh, yes, you know. My child—my child!"

To speak with this poor creature in her present distracted state was useless. Their presence evidently only irritated her. Shafton Keen had a conversation with the house surgeon, and it was decided that the poor creature should stay there under the care of a nurse until the inquest was holden. Delamere left some money for her use, and with saddened hearts the trio departed.

"What a scene!" said Mabel, as she got into the open air.

"Ah!" said Mr. Shafton Keen, emphatically, "enough to make us all think of causes, Miss Alterton."

"To see the misery produced by drink in that one place!" said Mabel.

"Our name, that we are so proud of," rejoined Delamere, "seems to have its bad as well as its good odour. What can our family have done to arouse the rage of that wretched creature? I couldn't understand her, Shafton. Could she mean my 'Uncle Boon,' as I used to call him, who went abroad years ago?"

"She was evidently frantic with grief," remarked Mabel, as her thoughts reverted to Mrs. Burnish's secret.

"There was method in her madness," said Shafton.

No other remark was made during the short walk home. And Mabel left the gentlemen in the hall, and proceeded to give Mrs. Burnish tidings of the event.