

The Story.

Three Times.

A TALE OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

THE FIRST.

It was only a very tiny, dirty scrap of paper, and the ragged lad who was standing under a gas lamp to decipher the words written upon it, was so poor a scholar that he spelled them out with difficulty.

"No—yes, that's it, number twenty something; oh! it's a three; no 'tain't, it's a five; number twenty-five, Dalby Street, is it? I know's now—it's Green! Dalby Green; and that's the identical place my poor mother took me to when we come up to London, before the cold and the want of vittles killed her!"

The lad drew the sleeve of his miserable jacket across his eyes and shivered—not so much because the biting wind of the December night was chilling his attenuated frame, as in sorrowful recollection of the sad-hearted woman whom he had seen perish from starvation on just such a winter's night as the present one.

"She took me there," he moaned. "I was a very little lad at the time, but I've never forgot how she held me up to look in at the gay folks that were dancing; and says she, 'Leu, if we had our rights this is where we should live. Fancy me, since she died, living in a grand house like that! I'll go and have another look at it to-morrow, see if I don't!'"

A shrill cry of "Leu!" made him hurriedly hide the scrap of paper, and return with a sullen "Well, what's up now? Can't a feller have a minute to himself, without being yelled after? I'm coming, ain't I?" And Leu, the outcast, the homeless orphan—who, having a curious aversion to joining either of the bands of thieves and rogues amongst whom he lived, was the drudge of a new lodging-house—shuffled back to the kitchen of his mistress. She was a virago, who paid his services with scraps of broken victuals, a share of a straw pallet when it could be spared, a corner of the dirty floor when it couldn't, and so many blows and hard words, that the once bright, sweet tempered boy, whose mother was still remembered in St. Giles as "the little lady," was rapidly becoming brutalized.

"Leu has been turning over his hoards," a dissipated vagrant facetiously suggested, when he was fiercely asked where he had been skulking; "he knows as Christmas is coming, and he's going to give us a handsome present all round."

"Maybe I could do that, if I had my rights," muttered Leu, whose thoughts were still dwelling on the words of his dead mother.

There was a roar of laughter from his rough companions, and the virago came towards him with upraised hands, vociferating, "I'll right ye, I will, you bragging vagabond!" But a sturdy little Irish apple-woman, who had been sitting in the chimney-corner taking a blast of the pipe, suddenly interfered in the victim's behalf.

"Ye'll let the boy alone, mistress. It's the drop o' whiskey I give him has got into his head and made him fool quarre. Come here, Leu, and sit quiet till the sines has come back to ye."

"What made ye say that? I ain't had no whiskey," said the lad, as she unceremoniously pulled him down on the up-turned basket that formed her own seat.

"Whisht, lad! Wasn't it to save yer bones from that great blacksmith's fist of hers? Why do ye vex her, seein' this is all the home ye have? What were ye a doin' when she called an' called, an' could get no answer out o' ye?"

Leu looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening before he replied.

"Looking over a bit of paper I got out of the big box beneath her bed," and he jerked his thumb in the direction of Mrs. Betsy Grimshy.

"When mother died there was a bundle of them papers under her pillow, and a chain and locket that she wore round her neck, and wouldn't part with it, not even when she was too ill to work, and I cried to her for bread. Old Betsy has sold the chain, but I'll have the papers some day."

"Sure, then, if they're yer own, why shouldn't ye?" observed the basket-woman coolly, and Leu nodded and whispered again.

"I drew this out through a crack, but the others is tied together, and she never lets the key of the box go out of her own hands."

But another shout for Leu put an end to this colloquy, and Irish Bridget had forgotten it when two days afterwards the lad slouched past the corner of the busy thoroughfare at which she retailed her fruits and nuts, on his way to the handsome mansion in Dalby Crescent.

It was Christmas Eve. The weather was bright, but piercingly cold; and Leu, who for some days past had been conscious of strange aches and pains in all his limbs, was blue with the cold when he dragged himself to the railings in front of No. 25. There he stood, and looked down the area and through the windows of the great kitchen, in which a plump cook and a couple of attendant satellites were rolling out paste for mince pies, and making other dainties for the morrow, regardless of the half-starved lad who watched them.

"Who lives here?" Leu asked of a newspaper boy, who had stopped to gaze with him, and only laughed derisively; when Mrs. Cook, with a threatening shake of her rolling-pen, made signs to them to go away.

"Lives here? Why, Capel, Esquire, the great banker, Han't you heard of him?"

Leu started.

"My mother's name was Capel—Mary Capel. They put it on her coffin."

"My wigs!" exclaimed the vendor of papers incredulously; then you must be one of the banker's rich relations. Why then you must be carried in a carriage, and pay him a Christmas visit!"

He ran on, laughing; and Leu, feeling as if his weary limbs would support him no longer, sat down on the lowest of the broad steps leading to Mr. Capel's door, staring vacantly at the white at a well-dressed boy and girl, a few years his junior, who were coming rapidly towards him, hand in hand.

Hetta the jolliest little darling in the world. Neither of them saw the pallid outcast till they stood beside him.

"What are you doing here, fellow?" exclaimed the boy angrily. "Go away directly, or I'll make you!"

"Oh, Maurice, he looks so ill—so hungry! Don't speak so roughly to him," pleaded the gentle girl.

Leu raised his sunken eyes to the delicately fair face of the little speaker, and gazed at it till his fixed stare frightened her.

"He's no business here," said Maurice Capel, the banker's son. "We can't have such a disreputable cad lurking round our door."

"Give him something, and he'll go away," whispered Hetta.

"Papa said we should not encourage beggars," Maurice told her, with a dignified air.

"But it's Christmas time," she pleaded, "when everybody gives to everybody—won't you? Then the poor lad shall have my sovereign that grandmamma gave me. I wanted to make some one happy with it."

Bidding Leu wait, the children ran into the house, Maurice returning alone with the children's solitary coin, for nurse had pounced upon the young lady to change her dress for dinner. By this time the porter, who opened the door, had oisted the outcast from his seat. Mr. and Mrs. Capel were coming along the Crescent, and what would he say if he saw his carefully whitened steps desecrated by the presence of a vagrant?

Hetta's golden gift—flung rather than presented to the retreating Leu—was scarcely in his hand when Mr. Capel stepped forward, stern and unyielding.

His first angry speech was for his son.

"How dare ye ignore his commands, and encourage such a disreputable vagabond as that? His next for Leu, whom he threatened with the police and treadmill, bidding him begone in such menacing tones that the lad attempted to obey—staggered a few paces, and then dropped on the pavement.

"Intoxicated, of course!" said the banker with a shrug.

"Dying, I fear," answered a surgeon, who chanced to be passing, and stopped to feel the pulseless wrist of poor, helpless, benumbed Leu.

"Better carry him to the workhouse," suggested some one else; and he was borne away by a couple of policemen, to spend his Christmas within the walls of St. Bonaventura's poor-house.

And thus ended Leu's first visit to the stately mansion of the Capels, No. 25, Dalby Crescent. Mr. Capel—touched for a moment by his condition—had resolved to do something for him if he lived; but in the festivities of the season the resolve was forgotten.

THE SECOND.

Years had glided by. Mr. Capel was entertaining a large party of friends and connections to dinner that night, in order to celebrate the advent of the New Year and the coming of age of his eldest son, the handsome, winning Maurice Capel. How proudly he alluded to his boy as the prop of his old age, when Maurice's health was drunk in the rare wines brought up from the cellar for that purpose; and how his heart swelled and his eyes glistened, as he looked around the table, from his stately wife to the pretty daughter, who had just come out; from the merry romping schoolboys, who sat on every side of mamma for this night only, and then retired, where their glances had just fallen—on the well-shaped head of his heir. Maurice vexed him sometimes—he was headless and extravagant; but these were merely faults of his age, and could be overlooked; if he would but conquer that foolish passion for his penniless cousin, Hetta—a fancy that was all very well while her father held high office in India, and could dower her well, but must not be encouraged now he was no more, and the girl a mere dependant in the house.

But where was Hetta, the pretty child, who had given her all to the outcast Leu? She sat in her aunt's boudoir alone. Mrs. Capel had advised her to nurse herself for a slight cold, and Hetta had understood that the wish was a command, and that she was not to appear at the banquet. It was a trial for her to obey—for she was young and fair, and had looked forward as hopefully as her more fortunate cousins to the dance which was to follow the dinner. But Aunt Capel had so willed it; and a little sadly she sat over the fire, sometimes listening to the merry voices below—sometimes dreaming of Maurice, till the entrance of a servant aroused her.

"What's to be done, Miss Hetta? Here's a young man demanding an interview with master, and refusing to go away until he has seen him. Mr. Capel would be so angry if he were called from his guests without sufficient cause, that I don't know what to do."

The footman—a mere lad, mortally afraid of his stern employer—looked so perplexed that Hetta, who was dearly loved in the house for her thoughtful kindness, took pity on him.

"Perhaps this stranger's business is important. Are you sure he said it cannot be deferred until to-morrow?"

"Quite, Miss; and he speaks so resolute there's no gain saying him. He says he must and will see Mr. Capel before he leaves the house."

"Bring him in here, and I will speak with him. It would be a folly to disturb my uncle unless it really could not be avoided. Perhaps I may succeed where you have failed, and induce this very obstinate personage to call again."

Walter hesitated.

"Please, Miss, I don't think he's quite the sort of man you'd like to have anything to do with. He isn't a gentleman—he's dressed in velvetens."

"Then it is some poor fellow in distress," and Hetta sighed, for she knew that Mr. Capel's charity only took one form. He would give largely to charitable institutions, knowing that his name would appear in the list of donors; but those who privately sought his aid rarely obtained it.

he picked it up. The price of this toy would have saved the life of his mother, and, in bitterness of spirit, he threw it from him with such force that it fell on the floor, and broke.

But when his eyes fell on the young lady, and he saw that his violence astonished and terrified her, he grew calm again. He remembered that sweet, child-like face; it had haunted his visions at St. Bonaventura's, when he was delicious with pain, and more than once since then he had hovered near the house to catch a glimpse of it.

The color returned to Hetta's cheek when he apologised for his rudeness, and she frankly asked if she might be entrusted with his reasons for insisting on an interview with her uncle.

"I am Leonard Capel!" he startled her by asserting—"the only son of his brother Robert."

"But Mr. Capel has no brother living!" said Hetta, as soon as she could command her voice. "The only one he had—my own dear father—was killed in a remote district of India some three years since."

"Pardon me, young lady: Mr. Capel once had two brothers; but I know why you are ignorant of this. The name of Robert Capel was never spoken in this house, for his relatives considered that he had disgraced them when he married the governess of his sisters; and so he died unrepentant at that obscure country town to which he had retreated. His widow, after vainly struggling to support herself and her child, appealed to his family for help, and was insulted with a refusal to believe that she had ever been legally married to her dead husband. Gathering together the proofs of her union, she traveled to London slowly and on foot, to seek an interview with the father of Robert Capel, and your grandfather, and prove to him that the assertion was a slander. But he was dead; his son ruled in his stead. One look at his stern face told her there was nothing to be hoped for at his hands; and, after wrestling for her child's sake with poverty and sickness till wearied out, she died."

"This is a sad tale, indeed!" murmured Hetta tearfully.

"And her son—why has he not told it sooner?"

"Ignorant of the papers in his mother's possession, and robbed of them as soon as she was no more, he was a poor, ill-used wretch, until curiosity leading him to come and look at a house his mother had pointed out to him when they first parted in London, he met with two strange adventures. An angel, in the shape of a fair, gentle child, piloted the ragged wretch, and bestowed on him her all; the first piece of gold he had ever possessed."

Hetta blushed deeply, for she remembered the circumstance.

Before he could make use of this generous gift, he was stricken with illness brought on by want, and carried to a workhouse, where, for the first time in his life, he found friends. The doctor who tended him, took his patient to his own house; and, as soon as he was sufficiently restored, clothed him, enabled him to earn his daily bread honestly, and encouraged him to try and recover the lost papers, that he might ascertain their contents. Miss Capel, this very night I succeeded in wresting the packet from the man who had taken my child; and I could pay her as much as her greed extorted. I have those papers here," (he touched his breast); "and they contain unanswerable proofs that I am the legitimate offspring of Robert Capel."

"My uncle is just. Surely he will be pleased to hear this—to acknowledge you as his kinsman!" Hetta faltered. She felt that this was scarcely the truth, and Leonard smiled rather scornfully.

"Pleased! Pleased! I forgive me if I doubt it. Have you forgotten that I am the son of his elder brother, and that by right of birth I can claim all the property that he succeeded to at his father's decease?"

Hetta pressed her hands to her bosom and gazed at him wildly, as with triumph in his eyes he once more looked around him. Who would dare to despise him now? The proof he had just given him of the outbreak he had surmised and—ah! sweetest hope of all—was the equal of the fair girl who stood trembling before him.

But she spoke—she roused him from his dream, and his gladness vanished.

"Do you know what will be the consequence to my poor uncle?" she cried. "It will be ruin; yes, ruin! For his wife will not let him accept any concessions you may offer. But worse than this—more terrible to bear—will be the disgrace that will fall upon him when the world puts, as it will do, the worst construction on his conduct."

"I am but claiming my own!" said Leu, firmly. "If it is his turn to succumb and suffer, is the fault mine? Those who had no mercy on my innocent mother, but left her to perish miserably, whilst they revelled in luxury, cannot expect any from me."

"But, my uncle is no longer young," pleaded Hetta. "His health is infirm. Any sudden shock might kill him; and rely upon it he did not knowingly wrong you! Oh! pity him!" and, in her excitement, she came and laid her hands on Leu's arm. "This very night he sits with his children around him, happy in the thought that their future is secured; that, die when he may, his son, his first born, his best-beloved, his noble Maurice, will inherit his wealth and unstained name. Can you have the heart to bring such sorrow, such shame, upon them all. Must all these innocent ones suffer?" Will you enjoy the riches, and station, to grasp which you must break so many hearts? Oh! think a moment ere you take so terrible a step!"

"You plead for those who do not deserve it," answered Leu, turning away that he might not see her beseeching eyes.

"Had I come to them for help—had I said to Mr. Capel, 'I am your brother's son, and I starve, would he have listened to my prayer? Why, then, should I renounce my rights that he may continue to enjoy what is not his own?'"

Still Hetta clung to him.

"Spare them, at least, for this one night. Break the tidings of their ruin gently, and try and see in Mr. Capel not the man who long years of affluence have made hard and worldly, but the brother of your own father. You will do this much!"

"For your sake I would do anything," Leu answered, fervently. "Ask what you will, it shall not be refused."

"You promise!" she cried, blushing deeply. "Then be a brother to Maurice."

"Ah, you love him!" cried Leu, starting as if he were stung. "If I destroy his prospects, I make you unhappy. I will never do that!"

He stood for some moments, his head drooping, his lips compressed, Hetta gazing at him anxiously, hopefully. After all, what would he gain by asserting his rights, if she were lost to him? How could he enjoy his newly-acquired riches, if he brought sorrow and degradation on her and the handsome youth she loved?

TO BE CONTINUED.