

Tales and Sketches.

THE BURNISH FAMILY.

A PRIZE STORY PUBLISHED BY THE SCOTTISH TEMPERANCE LEAGUE.

CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Burnish's Substitute receiving Morning Visits.

"Sweet looks, by human kindness bred!
And seemliness complete, that aways
Thy courtesies, about thee play,
With no restraint, but such as springs
From quick and eager visitings
Of thoughts."

Wordsworth.

The business of the House of Commons, as the Session advanced, became more and more absorbing to Theophilus Burnish. He was on several committees. To many of them he gave his presence rather than his attention. One puzzled him greatly. It was on the Sabbath Question; and our philanthropist was in the unpleasant predicament of being pulled in two opposite directions. He knew the value and blessing of the Sabbath to man, and he wanted so to legislate that every man might have the day; but a deputation of publicans waited on him, and told him plainly their business would be ruined if there was any interference with them on "the Lord's day." The influence of these publicans had seated, and, he well knew, could unseat him. He was reminded, too, that there were operations in the details of brewing that admitted no interruption, Sabbath or no Sabbath—that malting must go on, or the product would be spoiled. Yes; but that was done quietly out of sight, for the most part. Seen by the All-seeing, certainly, and a few defrauded slaves; but Sunday inside the malt-house need not perplex, if Sunday outside were kept. These open shops, how to close them and keep the public houses open, or how to run counter to the interests of "the trade," as it ostentatiously called itself? These were the horns of a dilemma that made the respected Theophilus Burnish think the M.P. at the end of his name cost him as much in comfort as, at his election, it had cost him in money. Added to which, he was solemnly assured the people of England would rise into revolution if any attempt was made to regulate the hours at which they should get their drink. These daily perplexities and nightly toils, in parliament and at meetings, made it needful that Mrs. Burnish should see most of the applicants for charity, who came every morning with their troubles to the dwelling. Now, that lady was just then occupied with a fashionable artist, to whom she was sitting for her picture, and, after having given her attention twice or thrice to the cases, she determined that Miss Alterton should see them for her. She had been pleased with all that Mabel had hitherto done, in the way of rendering assistance, and felt she could trust her judgment, which she thought she complimented, by considering to be "nearly as good as her own."

There was a little room, opening out of the hall, between the library and the dining-room, in which Mabel seated herself, at Mrs. Burnish's request, and received the applicants.

The first person that morning was a widow, who wanted Mrs. Burnish's vote and interest for the admission of her child into the Infant Orphan School. This case it deeply grieved Mabel to refuse; there was widow so plainly stamped in every feature of the pale anxious face. The story she told of her husband being an industrious young tradesman, taken off by fever just as he was establishing a business that promised to enable him to bring up his three children comfortably, of her own utter inability to provide for all her little ones, and that, if the youngest could be provided for, she would be free to struggle for the others—was all so simply and naturally told, without exaggeration, that it was quite a trial to say to her that Mrs. Burnish had already promised her vote. The poor thing rose with a sigh, and said she had been very unsuccessful. She had walked miles every day for a week, and obtained so small a number of votes, that, supposing they were allowed to stand over, and count at future election days, if she made no greater progress, her child would be beyond the age before she obtained the required number. Mabel could only reiterate her sigh as the widow departed. The sting of the matter to our heroine was, that a publican's widow had been promised the Burnish interest, which was sure to be successful, and this widow had already the son of a former husband in the London Orphan School, and a girl in the Licensed Victuallers' School; and it seemed to Mabel that widowhood was so frequent a condition with publican's wives, that they might be purveyors of orphans to charitable institutions.

The next case was that of an interesting but sickly young woman, for a letter to admit her into Queen Charlotte's Lying-in Hospital. It was a rule, and, in the main, a very good rule, with Lady Burnish, who subscribed to this charity, never to give this aid to a woman in her early married days. The parents, her ladyship said, ought not to be without the

means of providing for the reception of the first infant. But this was a deplorable case. The landlady of the house where a poor young woman and her husband lodged, was a laundress—a decent woman, when sober, but addicted on pay-days to drink. On the Monday previously, she had reached her home in a state of mad inebriation, and managed to set fire to the house, which was speedily burned down, destroying not only the drunkard's property, but all that the young couple possessed in the world. The husband had been badly burned in saving the life of the landlady, and endeavoring to extinguish the flames, and was now in the hospital, and would be for weeks unable to return to his work, as a shoemaker. The wife, expecting her confinement, was indebted to the charity of a neighbor, only a degree less destitute than herself, for a temporary shelter. This poor neighbor had accompanied the applicant, and it seemed to Mabel to be the very soul of tenderness the way in which she supported the trembling steps of the feeble suppliant, and helped her to a word as she told her tale of sorrow. She was a hard featured woman, bent by toil. "Are you a widow?" said Mabel, deeply interested in her manner, which was such a contrast to her appearance.

"Yes, ma'am; and have been for a matter of twenty years; and have brought up four children, with no other help than these hands, and God's blessing."

"I fear it must have been a hard struggle."

"Yes, pretty tough, ma'am, at times; but we've never wanted, and the children are all scattered now, and scratching for themselves; but they're all sober and honest, though it ain't for me to boast of it."

"It must be a great comfort to you," said Mabel. "And to be able to help your neighbor in her trouble is a blessing."

"O, yes!" said the woman heartily, "I've been poor enough, but never too poor to lend a hand, or give a bite, it may be, or a sup in a sober way, to them whose trouble was worse than my own."

"What do you mean by 'a sup in a sober way'?" said Mabel.

"Why, I mean, Miss, if I must be plain, and I ask your pardon if I'm bold, in speaking of myself and my ways, but I never could have maintained myself, and kept a bit of a decent home for my children, and put 'em out to tidy places, if God hadn't opened my eyes to see the sin of drunkenness. Me and mine never has anything to do with the public house. I ain't much credit. Miss, as to looks—to the way in which I lives—but I'm as strong for a day's work as ever I was."

"This woman's soul stands erect," thought Mabel, "however bent her body is;" and for once she felt a glow of pleasure that Mrs. Burnish had deputed her to see the applicants. One poor heart went away comforted; and the good Samaritan in humble life—O! there are many there—was strengthened for her future toils, by the evident approval of Mabel. How often heart responds to heart when no word is uttered. Sympathy distils silently as the dew, and the wayfarer in the dusky paths of common life is refreshed and strengthened thereby for the onward journey.

The next case was entirely new to Mabel's experience. A genteel-looking woman came to ask if Lady or Mrs. Burnish had any interest in the ——— Penitentiary. Mabel replied in the affirmative, and the applicant stated that she had taken an orphan girl, from the country, into her house as a servant. Unfortunately they lived next door to a public house that had a music license, and was much frequented. They had lost their servants, one after the other, and this had determined the applicant to take a girl from the country, that she could completely control. For a time the plan succeeded; but an infamous woman, who lay in wait to entrap and deceive the young, had, in one of her visits to the week-concert, caught sight of this girl, and had never rested till she got her into her toils. When the mistress of the house thought all was secure, the girl absconded, dazzled by the offers made her; and, for months, they had heard no tidings of her. A week previously, she had returned, worn by sickness, utterly destitute, and changed as to be scarcely recognized, imploring to be rescued from her condition of shame and sorrow. As the mistress had been the means of bringing her from the country, and knew that she had no near relatives who would receive her there, she felt anxious to be clear of the girl's ruin, and had applied, without success, to several Institutions; but her husband, she said, used one of Mr. Burnish's houses, and knew how benevolent the family were, and hence her application.

Mabel could give no positive reply in this case. The ——— Penitentiary was full, and the funds low, but she would inquire and give an answer in a day or two.

"I hope," said the applicant, "you will be able to help this poor thing; for I am paying for a lodging for her, and my husband knows nothing about it. He says we should caution the girls against the public house, and then let them take their chance."

"I think," said Mabel, involuntarily, "such houses are great nuisances."

The woman made no answer, but she looked hard at Mabel, then round the room, as if she either had not heard aright, or was in the wrong house. The look said, as plainly as if the lips spoke, "Why, if you do away with these houses as 'nuisances,' what is to become of the brewers and distillers?" Mabel read the look, and blushed, for the same thought occurred to her.