

How Constable 148 Z Did His Duty.

(By Lucy Taylor, in 'Light in the Home.')

'Any better, Sue?'

The question was an anxious one, but there was also a ring of hopelessness in its tone that told plainly enough what answer was expected.

And the answer came, brief, and bitter, from a woman's lips—

'No, Tom, just the same.'

Tom Morris had just returned to his poor little home, now swept bare by the relentless, desolating hand of poverty. He crossed the comfortless, fireless room and stood at his wife's side; together they watched the face of their only child as the little fellow lay propped up on an old couch, his cheeks pale and pinched, yet flushed with burning spots of fever.

Presently Sue spoke again.

'Any work, Tom?' she said.

'No,' returned the man stolidly, almost sternly. 'No—never will be, it seems. I'm sick to death o' tramping about. God has forsaken us!'

Sue did not answer, only her eyes filled, and she stooped over the child to hide the tears. Her own faith was at too low an ebb to speak a word of cheer to Tom.

'Can't the doctor do nothing for him, wife?' Tom asked presently.

'Yes,' was the almost fierce response, though uttered in a low whisper. 'Yes, if he could only have had a chance, but our darling is being starved; Tom, and no doctor's stuff won't do him any good if he ain't fed. He wants beef-tea more than physic, and we haven't got a shilling, and there aint a thing left to pawn.'

'And is there nobody won't help us?' groaned her husband. 'Is the boy to die for the sake of the few shillings thousands of rich folks would fling away in waste?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' returned Sue, her face set and stony, and evidently scarcely knowing what she said. 'But, look here, Tom,' she went on, 'Here's just one chance. Take home this dish; a lady sent a bit of custard the other day for Bertie, and she might help us again. Just say as the boys no better, if you can get a hearing.'

Tom took up the dish, gave one swift glance at his boy's face, and went.

'The boy has beef-tea to-night, whether the lady helps us or not,' he said, as he went out.

Sue wondered just a little what he meant. Then Bertie moaned, and she took him on her knees and lulled him into a troubled sleep.

'Mrs. Hill is engaged; she cannot attend to you now; she has visitors to afternoon tea.'

Such was the response to Tom's feeble appeal on behalf of his dying child. He turned away in silence, and the servant took up an elegant cake-basket and passed into the drawing-room to wait upon the guests; the price of the basket's contents would have fed Tom's sick child for days, but, of course, nobody knew, or thought of that.

Tom sauntered slowly down the street. He had no intention of going direct home; he could not face Sue, bringing nothing for the little invalid, nor did he mean to. He would have what he wanted now by force or fraud; the only question was, how. Conscience he fiercely silenced as he strolled on a bit, then came to the door of a little 'public,' and lingered a moment.

Tom was no hard drinker; he never came home drunk. he never spent much money

with the publican, and he fondly imagined his 'moderate' glass did no harm. He would have had one now, had the money been in his pocket; it would have given him 'nerve,' he thought, for an awkward job.

As he lingered, still very undecided what to do, an old companion came up.

'Why, Tom, mate,' said he, 'you're the very feller I wanted to see!'

Tom had not a very high opinion of this Joe Jackson, and he had seen nothing of him for a long time, and he was, therefore, a little surprised at the greeting.

'Come along in,' went on Joe, giving Tom a shove toward the swinging-door of the White Lion. 'Come along in, and we'll have a glass over it.'

'Aint got a brass farthing, said Tom gloomily, holding back.

'Stuff and nonsense, man! I'll stand treat,' returned Joe. 'What, down on your luck? What's wrong, now?'

'A good bit, I guess,' replied Tom; and then he went on to tell his companion of the straits of the last six months, and the desperate extremity of the present moment.

'Well, look here,' said Joe, after he had silently listened to the pitiful tale, the two men sitting alone together over their pots of



ale. 'We'll get you out of all that muddle in a jiffy, if you've the sense to do us a good turn.'

Tom promised, and Joe went on.

'The fact is,' said he, 'we've quite a little job on hand—just our set, you see, four of us. You know old Colonel Dyer's place? He's got an awful lot of silver and such-like, and—well, you see, he doesn't want it at all, hasn't no use for it, and we have.'

Joe paused a minute to see if his companion understood, or whether he was too much shocked to listen to further proposals. But Tom was well through his second pot of beer, and getting a trifle muddled; besides, he had felt so desperate before meeting with his chum that he was prepared for any means of getting the sorely-needed money.

Joe went on.

'You see we have arranged it all nicely,' he said in a very low voice, 'and it was to be to-night, and now that fellow Jonathan Jakes—a knowing fellow he is, and had planned it all out—he's took ill that bad he can't stand; and the colonel's going off to India in a few days, and the stuff will be sent to the

bank, sure as fate, and the game'll be up. It's mighty awkward.'

There was silence. Tom understood Joe's meaning perfectly; he wanted him to help. Well, he hadn't meant that sort of thing, reckless as he had felt; but it didn't do to be particular; money he meant to have somehow, and just as well this way as any other, since honest ways seemed utterly closed.

'What's to do?' he said, shortly.

'Well mate,' returned Joe, 'if you're game for the job, ye shan't hev nothink to do what will get yer inter trouble, and a good share of the swag all the same. Needn't come inside if ye don't want; but we must have somebody at hand to give the alarm if anyone gets scent of us, and to take any trifles we may lay hands on pretty sharp off. But there, it's as plain as a pike-staff; just across the railway line, past the orchard, over the fence, and there you are; no dogs to bother, and the old housekeeper's deaf, and sleeps like a pig. An easy job, I tell yer; wonder how the professional fellers hadn't never thought of it.'

An hour had passed before Tom and his chum had emerged from the White Lion, and by that time everything had been fully talked over; Tom was a sworn confederate in the intended robbery, and two half-crowns kept each other company in his pocket. He hurried home with quick step, only stopping once on the way at the butcher's for a good supply of beef for his child. Sue burst into tears when she saw it, and when Tom flung the silver beside it on the table; but to her eager questionings she gained but little or no response, except an unnecessarily emphatic statement that the food and money did not come from the friend who had given the custard. But Sue's whole heart was with her sick child, and she soon forgot any vague uneasiness about Tom's odd manner, in the joy of tempting Bertie with the little delicacies this money had provided.

The boy was in a sweet sleep when Tom kissed Sue late that evening and prepared to start.

'It won't be all night work, will it, Tom dear?' she inquired anxiously, scanning his face. Tom 'guessed not,' and went out in silence.

He slouched along on the darkest side of the road, feeling guilty and uncomfortable, and quickening his step a little when he met a leisurely policeman; he never remembered having noticed one with any particular interest before. There was nobody about, and down a dark out-of-the-way back lane Tom soon joined his companions of the afternoon. A few minutes later two others came up, and the four men moved quietly away, talking over plans briefly and in a low tone, as they crossed two or three fields towards the railway line which ran at the foot of Colonel Dyer's grounds. Here they scrambled through a hedge with some difficulty, and slipped down a steep incline at the side of the cutting. Then, crossing the rails, and climbing up the opposite bank, they easily scaled the low paling, and found themselves under the dense shadow of thick trees in a private garden.

Tom did not at all relish his position. In fact, he had heartily repented, by this time, of having listened to the evil proposal which had won his consent in a moment of weakness and desperation. However, he told himself (or the devil told him) that it was too late to go back now, that it would be a fine thing, after all, to have money enough to last Sue for weeks, whether he got work or not, and that it wasn't his fault if the colonel lost his property; the robbery would