

BOYS AND GIRLS

THE RED, RED WINE:

A TEMPERANCE STORY.

THE REV. J. JACKSON WRAY'S LAST STORY.

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CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

All that day the bairns had been laughing and romping as only children can, and to them, surely, the big occasion would be a happy memory. But now, as the evening shades were falling, even the quicksilver nature of youth began to tire and flag, and the elder and more thoughtful ones noticed that their beloved teacher was tired, too. Jennie Bardsley had been the life and soul of the children's treat, and though for her, oppressed as she was with a strange sad sense of ill impending, there was but little pleasure, yet all the more she tried to make the hours of childhood happy, and threw herself with a greater heartiness into the spirit of the day, if haply she might find relief from the overhanging dread of the unknown.

It was yet too early to put an end to the day's festivities, and, though tired, the excited children, like Oliver Twist, 'asked for more.'

'There now, children, I am going to sit down a little bit and get my breath, I declare you've nearly run my feet off!' And so saying, she threw herself upon a pile of shawls and rugs, and taking off her hat, wiped her face and fanned herself, and in fun gasped hard for breath.

'Oh, don't! teacher, we're not half tired yet!' cried the younger tyrants, in effusus, amid ripples of laughter.

'Yes, teacher, you shall,' cried the more thoughtful few. 'You're tired, Miss Bardsley, aren't you?'

'Yes, dears, I am rather, but I'll tell you what I'll do: if you like, I'll tell a story.'

'Ah, that will be nice!' exclaimed young and old alike. That was even better than the games she had run away from, and in a little while a whole bevy of wee bairns, and tads and lasses of an older growth, were disposed around her waiting to hear the story. But there was no story told that evening.

'Well, now, what shall it be about? Shall it be a fairy story? Shall I try to make you laugh or cry? No, I won't do that—there are too many sad stories in this world without making any up, aren't there? I'll tell you a nice bright one, and we'll begin in the dear old-fashioned way: "Once upon a time—"'

'Miss Bardsley, you are wanted at the gate.'

The speaker was the superintendent of her own Sunday School. He always wore a smite when he spoke to her, but now he only just beckoned her from the border of her little audience. His voice quivered with emotion, and his eyes were moist with tears, though the good old man's grey head was bowed all the time, as though he dare not look his gentle well-loved teacher in the face.

The brooding fear and sorrow which had overshadowed Jennie all the day settled down upon her heart. She tottered as she rose, and had to steady herself by puffing her hand on the shoulder of one of her girls. Casting her eyes round the field and towards the gate half vacantly, she became conscious that many eyes were looking at her. The night settled down black around her, the sky was gone from her view. Leaning on the shoulder of Mr. Fenton, she said, almost inaudibly, for her voice refused her bidding—'Oh, Mr. Fenton! my darling is dead!' and fell in a huddled heap on the ground.

Tenderly, tearfully, lovingly, Jennie Bardsley was carried home. Dark Lady had come to her stable at the inn, riderless; instant search had been made; they had found the body of the ill-starred vet. lying as he fell; and her brothers, coming to tell her the sad news, had judged it better to get her away from the children first. Alas! she had quickly divined it, and it was long before the facts could be revealed. For a long time the stricken girl hovered 'twixt life and death, constantly watched and tended by her close companion,

Alice Hayes, who, indeed, would hardly leave her friend's side; and long before her sad, sweet face, white and thin, was seen again outside her shadowed chamber, all that was mortal of Reuben Stanford was laid beneath a spreading elm in Netherborough churchyard.

Think you that heartbreaks such as these are rarely met with? What then of the constant chronic heartbreaks of the drunkard's wife and bairns?

CHAPTER XI.

The children's treat was over, and even for them the memory of that happy day was clouded with sorrow, though the sorrow was another's, and though many of them were too young to understand its full and bitter meaning. True, the treat had not been greatly shortened, for the night was darkening round when a darker night fell on the sweet soul of Jennie Bardsley. The children were marched in awe-struck silence—a strange, weird silence, when children are stricken dumb—back to the Temperance Hall. The tea that had been provided for them was hardly touched, and finally a few words were said by two or three of the gentlemen who were interested in the proceedings of the day.

The kindly vicar could only refer condolingly to the event that had brought the day to so sad a close, and asked them all to pray for those who had so suddenly been bereaved.

The inquest was held at the Head Inn, because, forsooth, there was not proper convenience any other where. And so in death young Stanford lay in the place where he had often poured out libations to the very god to whom he fell a victim. It is but fitting that the sacrifice should be laid upon the shrine, and Moloch, at his worst, never claimed as many victims as does the genial god of wine.

All knew the ghastly facts, witnesses, jurymen, and coroner, and the lying verdict they brought in was 'Accidental death.' 'Twas murder most foul, and, the more, the pity, the murder was practically committed in the house of his friend. No single word was uttered by the jury, no single sentence by the coroner, to hint that this fine, manly, clever, winsome, promising young fellow had been done to death, murdered, by alcohol, and that landlord, comrades, squire, custom, and government were all 'accessories before the fact.'

Indue time the Sabbath arrived, and there was a larger congregation than usual at the parish church, for the vicar's intention was generally known. As a rule, the vicar was not very particular in the preparation of his sermons, nor had he any very scrupulous ideas about the necessity of their being his own. He considered he did all that was necessary if he talked for some fifteen minutes at most on any proper and orthodox subject. An inspiration was a thing he knew nothing at all about. As for making anybody uncomfortable, this was a thing he would never have thought of for a minute; he was far too kind-hearted! This very limited idea of his duty he performed in that 'state of life to which it had pleased God to call him,' with unfailing regularity. Beyond this he professed to be nothing more nor less than an English gentleman.

On this occasion, however, the kind-hearted vicar was himself deeply touched. He had a great liking for the clever, brilliant young vet., and, in common with everybody else in Netherborough, was greatly attached to Jennie Bardsley. The suddenness of Stanford's death had impressed him greatly, and there was quite an unusual spirit of reverence in the church as he gave out his text that Sunday: 'What I say unto you, I say unto all, watch!'

With a loving hand he sketched the career, the abilities, the bright prospects of the dead

man. Spoke of the great number in Netherborough who in the course of nature had expected to reach 'that bourne from which no traveller returns,' while yet the course of Reuben's life was but half run. But the angel of God had called him home suddenly without warning, as if to emphasize to those surviving the lesson taught by his text, for 'In the midst of life we are in death.' He said that the whole town would mourn his loss, and he said right. He concluded his discourse by warning them all to be ready when the Master came.

The vicar knew all the facts of the case, and there was not a member of his congregation of maturer years but knew them too, and yet he never referred in a single word to the dread destroyer that had wrought his ruin, nor lifted a finger in condemnation of those who had partnership before God in the assassination of this youth of promise, and the heart-break that brought sweet Jennie Bardsley to the very borders of the grave.

Of course there were mild and whispered references to the procuring cause of Reuben Stanford's untimely end, nods and knowing looks and innuendos, anything and everything but the honest truth.

Mr. Norwood Hayes had his pastor—the pastor of Zion Church—to supper some time afterwards.

'What a sad end that was of poor Stanford's,' said Mr. Dunwell, the pastor. 'I declare I have not been so upset and distressed for a long time.' And there is not a doubt he meant every word he said.

Mr. Dunwell was a man of very considerable powers of mind, more than usually eloquent, even among eloquent men, a master of humor and of pathos, the life and soul of any social or family circle to which he had an entrance. As a preacher he was effective, and could have been more so had he used his powers to the full. Indeed, he was second to none in the pulpits of the neighborhood, and on the platform he was second to few.

'Yes,' said Mr. Norwood Hayes, 'he was a fine fellow; a man with a clever head and a kind heart, a man that meant well, and who was no one's enemy but his own.'

One of the biggest liest this that the devil coined, and Shakespeare knew better when he makes Polonius advise Laertes,—

'To thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.'

It is equally true that he that is not true to himself, his higher nature and his God, is false to every man, for 'no man liveth to himself alone,' and the influence we have on those around us can neither be measured nor computed.

'What Stanford wanted,' continued Mr. Norwood Hayes, 'was stamina, moral stamina, you know. Didn't know when to stop, his social gifts were great, as everybody knows, and of course that brought extra temptations, though to be sure I don't see why it should myself. A man should use self-control in everything, that is true temperance, of which the apostle wrote so highly, and then, of course, that would be included.'

'Yes, quite so; quite so, by that, you refer to his weakness for—'

'Yes, yes, to be sure, we all know poor Stanford's weakness—but let's be to his faults a little blind, for one must speak nothing but good of the dead. Besides, we none of us have room to boast, "let him that thinketh he standeth," and so on, you know what I mean.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Dunwell, 'I quite understand.'

Walter Bardsley sat the while strangely indignant that what seemed to him so weighty a matter should be treated so lightly, and had it been any other than Norwood Hayes, he