

aren't dependent on letting; and I must say it has its disadvantages. For some things I'm rather glad to be quiet again. I haven't had a moment to myself ever since they've been here; and one does like to get a chat with one's neighbors now and then. Still, I'm sorry they're gone, and after all, the money is a consideration.'

'You're right there, Mrs. Madden. I don't say but what my husband and me could 'ave worried on without it; we've weathered a good many bad seasons together, but still, as you say, it is a help; and we've let uncommon well this year.'

'So's everybody, I think,' chimed in another woman. 'It's been a good season all round; I don't think anyone's had much to grumble at, except, perhaps, Mrs. Ransom.'

'Well, it's her own fault, altogether,' said Mrs. Harding. 'She's had her chance, same as the rest of us; but if a woman will be so extraordinary, what can she expect? None of her lodgers'll stay there more than a few days, she treats them so very singular. You heard the way she served Mr. Parsons?'

'What was that?' asked everyone; though they had heard the story and commented on it a hundred times. Mr. Parsons was a well-to-do artist—a millionaire, in the eyes of Middlewick—who had stayed for a few weeks at the little fishing village.

'Well, Mrs. Harding continued, 'you know Mr. Parsons was going to give a dinner to some of his relations and friends, who were coming up from London. He'd ordered everything over from Sandbourne, hampers and hampers of poultry, and pastries and vegetables, the very best that money could buy, and Mrs. Ransom was to cook 'em all for seven o'clock dinner. The guests came, and so did seven o'clock; but when Mr. Parsons went out into the kitchen to see why dinner wasn't served, there wasn't a sign of Mrs. Ransom, nor cooking, nor nothing—not a sign!'

'No?' said the little crowd of women in a breath; though they knew the story as well as Mrs. Harding herself.

'Yes,' that lady answered emphatically, nodding her head. 'Not a sign. So they had to dine off cold vittles, which they got ready themselves, and after dinner when they went for a stroll on the shore, before their train went, who did they see but Mrs. Ransom looking out at sea through that old telescope of hers, and thinking no more of them nor the dinner than the man in the moon. If she treats her lodgers like that, I don't see what she can expect.'

'She's never been the same since that son of hers went away,' said Mrs. Madden. 'Always prowling about the sea, looking out, looking out; especially when it's a bit rough, though she hates the water like poison. Good reason, too, poor thing, it took her husband away from her, and now I think her son going off has clean turned her head.'

'Well, well,' said Mrs. Harding, 'we've all had our troubles—I've had mine like the rest, only I try not to give way to them.' And Mrs. Harding, whose greatest troubles in life had been little campaigns against measles and chicken-pox during the bringing up of her children, stalked off with a virtuous air to her cottage. 'I must be getting in too,' said Mrs. Madden. 'Going to be a dirty night, I think; the fine weather's come to an end with the season.'

The other women followed her example, and in a few minutes Middlewick High street was deserted.

#### CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Madden's surmise was correct—it was a nasty night, one of the nastiest that had been known for years along the coast. As the women of Middlewick looked across the

tables in their little cottages, where, in the lamp-light, they were busy over household mending and making for the winter, they thanked God that the burly forms of their husbands met their eyes, and that none of their kith and kin were out upon the bosom of the raging deep.

Mrs. Harding's husband sat in an arm-chair before the fire, which the chill autumn evening rendered necessary; Mrs. Harding's children slept in warm beds upstairs; Mrs. Harding's larder was filled with wholesome provisions; Mrs. Harding's pocket was lined with gold and silver. She had spoken a few hours before about her troubles, but bearing them did not seem such a trial to her as one might have imagined, from the Spartan way in which she had spoken of them to her neighbors.

Mrs. Ransom sat that evening in another Middlewick cottage, but her surroundings were very different. No cheerful fire glowed in the grate, the flickering candle-light shone on no children's stockings, with big 'potatoes' in the heels of them, and no friendly eyes looked into hers from across the table. Mrs. Ransom was alone.

She was thinking, as she sat in that barely furnished room, of a time when there had been mending to do—when that empty arm-chair by the fireplace was filled; when a little bed up above wanted tucking in every evening, when the larder was full of good victuals, and when there was plenty of money in her pockets to buy more food with whenever it was needed.

But that was years ago. Years? It seemed like centuries. The world itself had changed since that sad evening when her husband's body was brought, mangled and lifeless, from the cruel sea. And her boy? How she had worked for him, slaved for him, trying to scrape together enough to put him to some honest home-keeping trade, and to wean him from the love of that remorseless enemy which had robbed him of his father. But the love of the sea was in his blood, in every nerve and sinew and fibre of his body, and so Dick Ransom, leaving only a line of farewell, set forth one day to try his fortune on the great waters. By and by letters came, dated from queerly-named places, and with queer looking stamps on the envelopes, and for a time this kept away absolute despair. Then came weary weeks and months of waiting, during which no news reached her, and at last word came to Middlewick that Jack's ship, the 'Bonnie Doon,' had foundered with all hands.

Well, 'We all have our troubles,' as Mrs. Harding said, but there were some who did not wonder that the widow's head seemed 'clean turned' by the news, that she hated the sea with a great hatred, yet still hoped madly against hope that it might yield up her treasure. There were some mothers who did not wonder that she forgot all about her visitors when a strange ship passed, beating up towards harbor, but rushed out with her husband's old glass to the beach, and peered anxiously through it, to see if perchance the name 'Bonnie Doon' might be painted on the vessel's timbers. There were some fathers, weather-beaten, hard-handed (though not hard-hearted) old fishermen, who did not wonder that in the little village church she always joined so heartily in that hymn, 'For those in peril on the sea.'

She had a queer discordant voice, no two notes were in tune, yet she hummed that hymn this evening as she peered out through the window into the wild night. The beach was white with foam, for miles one could see the gleam of the tossing wave-crests.

At last Mrs. Ransom went up to bed, earlier than most of her neighbors, for even the price of candle-light had to be studied.

Yet she could not sleep. The rattling of the window-panes, the noise of wind and wave, the anxious thoughts that would fill her mind, in spite of Mrs. Harding's well-meant assurance that there was no longer any cause or use for them, kept her awake, tossing to and fro upon her bed. Suddenly the booming of a gun sounded above the noise of the storm, loud voices beneath her window, and the clatter of hurrying footsteps, told her that a vessel was lying in distress off Middlewick, and springing out of bed she flung on a few garments and hastened down to the beach.

A boat was already being launched to the rescue, and women and men together were starting it on its perilous journey. Three fishermen had already taken their places in it, a fourth sprang in just as Mrs. Ransom reached the shore. Seized with a sudden impulse, 'in one of her mad fits' the people said afterwards, she thrust her way through the little group, rushed through the boiling surf and sprang into the boat just as a retreating wave swept it from the beach.

'Go back! come back!' shouted the men in the boat, and the women on the shore, but it was too late.

'May as well be useful while you're here,' growled one of the men, 'cause you'll have to stay here now. Just give an eye to that rope; let out some of the slack if you find it straining.'

Middlewick is not well supplied with life-saving apparatus, being only a primitive village, and the only way to transmit a rope to the doomed vessel was for the boat to carry it out from the shore. Even then it was a difficult matter to get it on board the ship.

'Look out, now,' said Harding, who was in charge of the rescue party, 'we'll be battered to pieces if we once get washed up agen her. Green, you can throw farthest, have a shot at chucking the rope, while we hang on the oars.'

The men straightened every muscle to keep the boat as close as possible to the ship, while Green threw the rope—threw again and again, for each time it fell short of its object.

'It's no use, 'Arding, I can't—' he began, when Mrs. Ransom sprang up and snatched it from his hand. The next moment, crying loudly, so the men said afterwards, the name of her missing boy, 'Jack,' she sprang from the boat and was carried in the mad rush of water towards the ship.

The men who were waiting anxiously on the wrecked ship, just managed to catch her as she was dashed against the side of their vessel. In her hand, clutched tightly, and twisted round the wrist, was the rope-end, and before morning dawned passengers and crew were all landed, by means of it, on Middlewick beach. The captain brought with him, along the rope, the poor battered body of their rescuer.

And was her missing son really there? The coroner asked that at the inquest; but there was no Jack Ransom among the rescued, and Middlewick people told him that his body lay fathoms deep, thousands of miles away. 'Only another of Mrs. Ransom's mad fancies, sir,' they said. Yet it is not every mad fancy which can save a score of lives.

Information gathered from the leading officials of forty-five railways employing 200,000 men shows that, without exception, the companies regard habitual drinking as hurtful to the efficiency of the service, and they forbid the use of intoxicants to employees while on duty. Fourteen of the roads require total abstinence from intoxicants for all men connected with train service.