

THE MAGIC OF KINDNESS.

BY JOHN W. KIRTON.

DOWN in the East-end of London there are several streets and courts in which multitudes of people live, or rather exist. In one of these narrow courts, up two flights of creaky stairs, a man and his wife with three children managed to eat, drink, and sleep. There was scarcely an article of furniture in the place, while an apology for a bed consisted in a bundle of straw and rags, collected together in a corner. Chairs were unknown, and even a table had to be constructed of a rough piece of wood, supported by a few bricks piled one upon another. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a more complete picture of wretchedness and want, than was presented to the eye of anyone who might have looked in, early on a summer morning a few years ago.

Nor was the room the only wretched part of the matter. Father, mother, and children were all more or less suffering under the same sad signs of ruin and neglect, each one blaming the other in turn for the want they were enduring, and now and then bitterly lamenting that they had ever known each other. Yes, sad to say, a mother can and does under such circumstances forget her sucking child, and will often say that she "wishes she had never known the brat."

It had not always been the case with the family referred to; for it was not very far back in their history when Frank Bennett was known as a steady, industrious man, and Emma, his wife, was a smart, active servant in a respectable family. The day they were married, all their friends prophesied that they would live very comfortable together. But, alas! the bright days were gone. The neat furniture and the clean cottage had to be exchanged for a place which at one time would have been scorned by both without a moment's hesitation.

Nor did this sad change come about all at once. For six or seven years everything went as smooth as could have been wished. Frank was a good workman, and had plenty to do, and though he sometimes after the day's labour would now and then drop into the "Brown Bear" to have a glass, to discuss the questions of the day, yet he always made his way home at an early hour, however much his companions might press him to stay. However, it came to pass that when his family had been increased by the addition of a boy and girl, and there was daily a prospect of another being added before long; his master, for whose he had worked for some years, died. The business passed into other hands, and he, with a few others, were discharged.

It has been said that "troubles never come alone." Well, it sometimes so happens, and in Frank's case, it certainly was the case; for one of the children was taken ill at the time he was on the point of leaving his situation, and to add to his anxieties and expenses, his wife was laid aside, having just added another child to their number. No wonder, under such a combination of trials, Frank's heart was troubled. In vain did Emma urge him to keep up his spirits, and hope for brighter days; he settled down into a kind of blank despair, from which it seemed impossible to deliver him.

Ah! it is a sad thing when trouble thus overtakes any one, if they have not made provision for the "rainy day." Such was the case with Frank and his wife. They had spent all he earned week by week, never thinking that the time would come when they might need a few pounds to fall back upon; and, worse than all, they had never made it the habit of their lives to put their trust in God. It therefore followed that without money, they soon found themselves without friends, and never for a moment thought of Jesus, the "Friend who sticketh closer than a brother," and who was in all points tried like as we are, and therefore able to succour those who are in trouble.

It is a grand thing to have a fixed principle which will guide us, whenever we are placed in any circumstances of trial or danger. Such a principle is *true religion*. It matters not where we go, or what we may have to do, or the number of the trials or difficulties through which we may have to pass. God has anticipated every one of them, and to all who put their trust in Him, the promise is clear, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." Such help as this, however, could not be given to Frank or his wife, for the simple reason, *they never sought or desired it*. The result was that, hopeless and prayerless, they drifted out on the cold world to ruin.

He wandered the streets many a day seeking for work, but found none. Everybody complained that trade was so dull. Wet and weary he returned home day after day with a heavy heart to his family. To meet their pressing wants, one article of furniture after another was sold, hoping that something would turn up, but the dark days and long nights of winter set in without the hope being realised. At length he grew somewhat reckless, and when he met with some old shopmates, gladly availed himself of their offer to "stand a glass," though strange to say, they never offered to "stand a loaf" or "a joint of meat." Step by step he abandoned all hope, and like a vessel at sea without a rudder or chart, drifted headlong like thousands more down the stream of life, dragging wife and children with him, all the time saying that "there was no one in the world so unfortunate as he was."

After a long struggle he succeeded in getting a situation, but the loose habits which had grown upon him while he was idling about, became an additional difficulty in his way of regaining his lost ground, and once more he lost his place, but through neglect occasioned by his now confirmed dissipated habits. So step by step they sank, until they were obliged to take the room in the court already named, as being the only chance of saving themselves, as they thought, from going into the workhouse. But they little thought that "man's extremity" is often "God's opportunity," as it proved in this case. What prosperity and comfort failed to teach, poverty and want was to do, and that also by what appeared a very unlikely process, but so it was, as the result will show.

At the bottom of the court into which they had thus been compelled to remove, a few earnest Christian young men and women had started a school into which they gathered such boys and girls of the locality as they could persuade to come. The place consisted only of a small ground-floor room which they rented. But it was large enough to sow Divine seed, the fruit of which was to cheer the hearts of many, notwithstanding the scoffs and jeers with which they often had to contend, from those who did not care either that their children should be taught to read, or to learn the blessed truths by which alone all sadness and sorrow can be fully met.

Among the children whom the teachers succeeded in getting to attend was Frank's eldest boy, a sharp lad of about eight years of age, his mother saying that "It was better for him to be there, than rambling about the streets," and when the teacher called one day to ask if she would allow the little girl also to come, she gave a kind of reluctant consent, thinking it the easiest way to get rid of an unwelcome visitor.

Thus the weeks and months rolled by; the boy and girl learning to read, while the father and mother were, at the same time, learning the way to ruin more completely, inasmuch as they had formed the acquaintance of some of the neighbours, who gladly hailed their company with all the rude pleasure they could express, and soon made them feel careless and indifferent about everything decent, much less religious, for, if it is true that "evil communications corrupt good manners," it is no less true they "corrupt bad habits"; and so it proved, for Frank went from bad to worse, while Emma, also, was losing everything worthy of a woman, by her keeping company with those in the court whose habits were of the worst kind.

It is not needful to describe the wretched life thus endured. During the day both the boy and girl were sent out to beg, or get what they could to keep the family from real want. Sometimes they were successful, at others returned without a penny, and even without a stray crust which they had saved from the gift of some kind-hearted, but often mistaken, person. One morning the boy complained of feeling too weak to get up from his wretched bed of rags, and the father, maddened with passion, dragged him up, and said—

"If you don't start off at once, and bring us home something before long, I'll kill you!"

"I can't, father; indeed, I'm ill."

"Don't talk to me about being ill; we are too poor to be ill."

"But I'm ill because we're poor, and can't get bread to eat."

"Then go and steal, or"—and clenching his hand and raising it, he added, "or I'll knock the life out of you!"

The poor lad crept downstairs, every limb aching, but, when he reached the bottom, he fainted away from sheer exhaustion. How long he lay there he did not know, for when he came to himself, he found he was lying in the well-known corner of the room, with his mother bending over him with some of the same kind of interest that he remembered she used to show, before they came to live in the court.