

A BUSINESS TRANSACTION.

I.

The poor old woman kissed her son for the last time. Her pale cheeks flushed as she did it, and a braid of white hair hastily put up that morning, before she went to court—fell from under her faded, black bonnet.

The train was about to move out. She spoke no word, but moved back and took her place at the station door. The groups on the platform—mostly happy and expectant groups, laden with Christmas packages—surrounded her. Her only boy was going from her, and he was going to prison. He kept his eyes down. Only when he had to move toward the train, between two policemen, he turned and tried to kiss his hand to her, but he had forgotten his handcuffs. His face turned red, he did not look at her again.

She stood, with the braid of white hair hanging over her eyes, she watched the train disappear. With a heavy sigh she went out into the muddy streets. They were full of noise; wagons dashed past, evergreens swung from awning posts and shop windows. The world was glad, for the Christ-Child was coming. But her son had gone from her. Her eyes caught the gilded sign, "Foreign and Domestic Liquors." She shuddered, and, hailing a car, went home. That home was desolate enough. It consisted of three little rooms: one in which a sewing-machine stood—this was her sleeping-place; there was another, the kitchen and dining-room; and still another, his bedroom. The house might have been called a "shanty," if it were not for the scrupulous neatness of everything outside and in.

She walked from room to room as if dazed. She was alone. Sometimes, in the first years of her widowhood, she had feared for the future of her chubby little boy, who was all she had in the world; but no such fear as this dreadful reality had oppressed her. She had imagined him dead; she had dreamed of his encountering many dangers in the world; but she had never dreamed that he would leave her with the brand of disgrace on his brow.

It had come to pass on that day young Nicholas Harding had been taken to prison, handcuffed as a thief. His mother believed in his innocence, nobody else did. It was generally acknowledged in the village of Holstein that drink did it. Nicholas had been "steady" enough until he fell in with the members of what was called a target club. His employer, the best carpenter in the place, had then begun to complain of him. His mother noticed a change. He no longer stayed at home in the evenings. His mother owned ten acres of land just outside of Holstein, on which she had put up, with her own earnings, a little house. She and Nick had often talked of building a larger one; for in the pleasant weather, Holstein, because of its medicinal springs, was a famous resort for city people. Why should she not cease her perpetual work at the sewing-machine and take some of these people into her house—if she had a house big enough for them?

Nicholas entered heartily into this plan. As an apprentice, he earned little, but part of that little was put away for the new house. How often they talked of this! By and by when Nicholas had learned his trade, and the money began to come in, he would go to college. This dream lightened many a weary day as Mrs. Harding bent over the ever present sewing machine. But the target club ended it all. Nicholas brought no more money home. He wore flaming neckties and a pin of colossal size nestling among their folds. He was out every night; he had his "committees" to attend to, and other important business.

Mrs. Harding saw by the village paper that the target club was about to give its first annual "reception," and that her son's name headed the list of managers. She sighed, but thought no evil. "Boys will be boys," her Nicholas could not forget all the lessons of his lifetime. One Saturday night he stumbled up-stairs, and the next morning he was not up in time for Mass. His mother did not go to his room; she knew what was the matter, she had knelt by her bedside all night. She would not accept the horrible truth. "The poor boy is not well," she said aloud. Nobody asked her about Nick as she came home from church; it was well known

in Holstein that he had been dragged home drunk by his friends the night before.

The time of the target club "reception" came around. Nick wanted money. He had invited a "lady friend." He must have a carriage all the other fellows wore to go to this dance in carriages. He calculated that the whole thing would cost him fifteen dollars. Where was he to get it? He could not borrow it, he could not beg it. He asked his mother for it; she had put all her money—it was not much—in the savings-bank. She could not get it without two weeks' notice at the bank. He said nothing, but he made up his mind that he would have the money; he *must* have it. He was the first floor manager, he had asked the most dashing girl in the village to go with him, it would be ridiculous to back out, everybody would know the reason. He *must* have the money, and he had it. He took a twenty dollar note from his employer's desk and went to the dance. That same night he was arrested.

Mrs. Harding would not believe him guilty. She mortgaged her lot to get money to pay the lawyers—she had the highest priced men in the State. She did her best; he was sentenced to eighteen months in jail—thither he was taken on December 24, 1880.

II.

Mrs. Harding had several earnest friends in Holstein—all self-respecting people have earnest friends. The best of these was Father MacDowell, the priest of St. Michael's. He was never tired of praising her industry, her faith, her charity. When this misfortune befell her he said little, but he went, on the first "visiting day" at the jail, to see Nicholas. He returned with much consolation for the mother.

"The boy is thoroughly penitent," he said; "I can vouch for it. God will bring good out of evil, and when you see him here again he will be a man. Keep your heart in peace, and make a home for him here. With God's help, he'll be a good man yet. He will never touch a drop of liquor, depend on it, if he gets home safe."

Mrs. Harding was greatly comforted. She went back to her work, supported by the sweet hope of the priest's words.

Another friend of hers was Mr. Dornin, the owner of the great hotel at Holstein and of the mineral springs. He sent her a ten-dollar gold piece in advance for some mending he asked her to do for him. He held the mortgage on her lot, and three months afterward that ten-dollar gold piece went back to him as part of the five per cent. interest she had contracted to pay him.

The winter and spring were wearisome to her. She worked all day and half the night; but all her little hoard spent itself. She fasted many a day that she might save enough to pay her way to the jail. The "visiting days" were oases in her life. Nicholas was well spoken of by the authorities. His term of eighteen months would be cut down to one year. This was joyful news to his mother; it was better than a tonic, and she worked and worked with renewed courage.

It was the general opinion in Holstein that this industrious little old woman could help herself, and she was allowed to do it. How hard it was! She paid the first three months' interest on the mortgage; she refunded the twenty dollars which the carpenter said Nick had taken—she never believed that her son had taken it, and she gave it to the man with that protest; she paid several debts which Nick had contracted, and she existed. Work became scarce; and her friends, who would have given her alms, would have let her starve rather than inconvenience themselves to make work for her. If there is anything most worthy of admiration in American civilization it is strict attention to business.

Mr. Dornin, who was never absent from his pew at High Mass, noticed with satisfaction that the Widow Harding was devout. He would have a lot of overalls made for his laborers in the spring and help her along. Of course she would do them for less than the tailor—say at fifteen cents a pair. One hundred overalls at fifteen cents—he remembered he was at Mass and thumped his breast industriously. Then his thoughts wandered to the mortgage. She couldn't pay the interest; he would have to foreclose. Her lot was one of the best in the place, and the water-power went with it. The electric lights and the motor might be in his control if