

STEP BY STEP.

A TRUE STORY, BY JULIA M'NAIR WRIGHT.

Saturday and Sunday had been the great days of carouse at the Bambeck grog-shop. Cortin's bar-tender had not been paid a salary, but he had been given a certain share of the proceeds of sales; he even more than Cortin, resented the work carried on by the Wade family. His profits were falling off wonderfully; on Saturday nights they went up to the Cottage to hear singing; on Sundays they now had something to read, and expected to go to the meeting in the evening, and did not desire to go loaded with fumes of whiskey and tobacco; therefore the guests at Cortin's liquor store decreased. The bar-tender nourished a deadly hatred toward all the Wade family; he called them "thieves and interlopers hypocrites and fanatics;" he longed to have some evil happen to them. "They leased the house for six years," he said to his old mother, "or 'd Cortin would turn them out fast enough."

"It would be a pity to turn out such a genteel, kind-spoken family, with a good deed for every one," said his mother.

"Good deeds! Bad deeds you may say; they are filching the food out of our mouths, and the profit out of our purse."

"But, Jen, my lad, I'm fearing this is a bad business and will lead you to ruin. I would you were back in the mine."

"But I can't be back, since that lump of ore fell on me and lamed me. If I hadn't this, we'd starve."

"Perhaps so. But all the same, Jen, my boy, I'm more uneasy about you now than when, 'on, wrought in the mine. I'm that afraid you'll come to harm."

"Well, I did come to harm there, sure enough," said Jen, looking at his crushed foot. "What are you fearing now?"

"Sure, my dear boy, the mine wrecked a piece of your body, but if you turn drunkard you'll be wrecked entirely."

"Never you fear that. You'd better fear lest I am starved out and end in a poor-house, and you too, old woman. I wish to gracious that their house would burn down over their heads, for there isn't another one in this district, within ten miles, that would do for them that could be had, and so I should be rid of them and their ways. I've a mind to light the place myself, and so be done with them."

"Oh, Jen, Jen," said the old woman, "don't talk in that way; you may be led into evil, and what then? You'd get to State's prison, and break your poor old mammy's heart!"

"They'd better not drive me too hard," said Jen, sulkily.

The new war-room was being built; Philippa had received thirty dollars from her former Sabbath school, ten of which went for papers, and twenty were to be laid out in renovating the present lumber-room; meanwhile the men and women of the lammet met in the big kitchen of the cottage.

The children of Dora were present at these meetings; the bright faced boy and the two pretty little girls were much admired by the bank men, many of whom were shut out from all home ties, and were far away from friends. One of the men, Luke Green, a herculean fellow, one of the hardest drinkers, took a great fancy to little Katy; the child's fragility and strangely timid manner seemed to have an absolute fascination for Luke Green, and he was constantly making curious toys for her; he scarcely ever came near the Cottage—and he was found of making errands there—without some gift to lay on the shrine of his baby charmer. Luke had been careful never to touch liquor when he was going to the Cottage, he had too much respect for the ladies; he went there clean, sober, and quiet. But one Sunday Luke forgot himself; the day was hot, and old habit was strong, and Jen was persuasive, and moreover Jen had added to the allurements of the "Free-and-Easy" a bowling alley, and while Luke played bowls he now and again had a glass of grog. He reached the Cottage after the rest of the men had gathered, and Rappé Wade was sitting by the table looking out a cl' pter. The children were near a window by themselves, and Luke had made a rustic basket for Katy. Two tipsy to exact-ly consider the proprietaries of the occasion, he went across the kitchen, staggering a little, and holding out the basket. The three ladies were near the organ, selecting familiar hymns and tunes; poor Katy was the object of her intense horror, a drunken man, coming toward her. Her big eyes

grew bigger, with black circles under them; her skin became livid, she spread out her thin, wavering hands, and uttering a terrible scream, fell on the floor in a convulsion. All was confusion; in a minute carried the child away, and after a little, Rappé came back to the room full of men.

"What is it, sir? Can we do anything? Shall we fetch a doctor?" cried Bent.

"What is wrong with the blessed little one?" said Luke, sobered by surprise and distress.

"Luke," said Mr. Wade gravely, "it was you; you alarmed the child. She saw that you were tipsy."

"But not to hurt," protested Luke, flushing, "not to hurt. I did take a little, but drunk or sober, I'd never harm a hair of that child's head."

"I daresay," replied Mr. Wade, "but yet the very sight of a man in liquor throws our poor Katy into a spasm. Now, my men, sit down. I will change the order of exercises to-day. I am going to tell you a true story. I have made up my mind to take you in to my confidence, and tell you part of the history of my own family. When I carried Katy to her bed, Miss Wade, my sister, said, 'Oh, the curse of strong drink! the curse of strong drink!' and I made up my mind, if anything that I could say would help to free you, my good fellows, from the curse of strong drink, that I would say it, at any sacrifice to my personal feelings."

The men sat down and looked solemnly attentive. After a short prayer, Rappé Wade, in simple, feeling language told them the history of his unhappy brother-in-law. He depicted the joyous young couple, the comfortable home, the idolized children. He showed that home entered by the serpent, the fight with poverty and shame, the disgraced children, the nearly ruined health of the wife, the poor little child born to the curse of a Haunting Fear. Then came the violent death—the shadowed memory—the breaking up of the household. Again and again, as he recited the wrongs of his sister and her children, his voice was broken by emotion. The men listened breathless; and here and there a big tear rolled down a brown, rough cheek. When the story was ended there was a dead silence, and, bending his head, Rappé Wade prayed earnestly that all those present might be delivered from the power of strong drink. He then opened his Bible and read rapidly texts concerning drinking and drunkards.

"The drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty."

"Nor drunkards shall inherit the Kingdom of God."

"A wake, ye drunkards, and weep."

"While they are drunken as drunkards they shall be devoured;" and so on for many others. When he had closed, there was a pause; then Bent rose and said: "Sir, we have been much given to drinking; there was no interest or amusement provided for our leisure hours, except what we had at the grog-shop. Until your family came, there was no gathering-place for us of Sundays, except at the Free-and-Easy. Temptation was in our way, and many of us fell into it. I know we have wasted our hard-earned wages, and lost days' work, and gotten many a bruise and ache and fever down here at the 'Free-and-Easy,' and why it is named FREE or EASY, I can't tell. As for free, it leeches you of your last copper, and as for easy, it treats us in the end hard enough. I, for one, wish we had a Temperance Society here, and a Pledge. I'd sign the pledge fast enough, and I've no doubt, if we had a society and a place for meetings, we could manage to have as good a time as we ever did at the grog-shop. What say, friends?"

"I say," responded young Brown, rising, "that if we had a place of meeting, we could spend a little of that cash we've been lying out so free on beer and toby, in getting us papers and such things, and we'd find that signing the pledge was to our pleasure and our profit."

"I feel," said Mr. Wade, "that our Company have done wrong in not providing some place for your proper entertainment. I think we owe you a reading-room, or a meeting-room, or whatever you like to call it. I intend to have the lumber-room cleaned out, seated, whitewashed, and put a stove in it, and among you, if you keep it clean, you shall have it for a meeting or society room, for all who do not bring drinking or gaming into it. I don't say it is only for those who sign the pledge. Some of you

may not choose to take that step now, but will be ready to do so by and by; but I do hope that you will form a Temperance Society, and that many of you will find it in your hearts to take the pledge now."

The news of the temperance talk at Mr. Wade's house, and the project of a Temperance Society, which met at once with some warm supporters, roused to double fury the wrath of Jen, the bar-keeper.

"I'll be even with them, the swindlers!" he shouted; "they want to snatch the bread from my mouth."

"Well, son," said his mother, "suppose you take some other way of getting bread? The lady from the house said to me lately, 'Wouldn't your son rather give up this and take some other work, if it was offered him? Perhaps something could be had for him at the works. I think they ought to do something for him, as he was hurt in the bank.'"

"Tuts," said Jen, gruffly, "this pay's twice as well as their poor, starveling wage."

"Maybe so, but that wage is honest, and fair earned, and this comes out of the impoverishing of you fellows."

"Don't you go again' me, mother," said Jen crossly.

"Well, I'm looking at things more serious like," said his mother, "and you're hardening, Jen, and not so nice a lad as you were once—and I'm afeared that there's another world after this that we're not rightly preparing for, and mebbly, boy, you'll lose your soul for a poor bit of living here."

"Oh, bother! Brown has been preaching to you; he's turned a regular Methodist. I wish he was dead, and Bent moved away, and Wade's house burnt to cinders."

The change at the Works was made, the renovated lumber-room was handed over to the men for week-day and Sunday meetings, and the Sabbath Temperance papers subscribed for began to come, and the men clubbed their money for one or two Dailies. The Temperance Society, formed with ten members, was soon fifteen strong; and most of those who did not join were friendly.

Aunt Grace said to Philippa that as they had many friends who took popular magazines, they had better write and ask them for numbers which they were not keeping for binding. These magazines were a great treat to the men assembled in their new resort, and what they called the Reading-room was a formidable rival of "Cortin's Free-and-Easy." Cortin himself seldom appeared near the Works, but he was a loud reviler of the religious and moral enterprises there. He called it "sneaking Methodism," proclaimed his belief that there was neither God, future life, nor immortal spirit, and extolled his own doctrine. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." He carried his hostility so far that he refused to sell Mr. Wade produce from his farm, and when Jen the bar-tender wished his bad wishes and grumbled what he would like to do to the Wade family, old Cortin slapped him on the shoulder, crying, "Go it, Jen! You're a lad of spirit. I'll stand by you!"

Jen brooded over his losses and supposed wrongs, and shaped in his mind the images of the revenge which he would like to take. Dangerous work this.

"Vice is a monster of such hideous mien, As to be dreaded, needs but to be seen; Be seen too oft, familiar with her face, We first endure, then pity, then embrace."

It was a November night, the first November after Philippa went to Bambeck, and Nathan Bent, for a wonder, could not sleep. He turned restlessly on his pillow for a long while, then rose, dressed, and went to the window of Luke Green's cottage, and tapped. In response, Luke stuck his shaggy head into the night air.

"Green," said Bent, "I can't sleep. I'm worried about the master. He's got enemies—people mostly has, that sets themselves in any wise against the current. I've heard a word or two dropped as I wouldn't like to repeat, and I've seen a sign or two I would not like to mention. I may misjudge folk. Howson'd'ever, Green, I'm a-going to walk up to, and round about the master's rottage, and I don't know but you might prefer going with me."

Sartain, said Green—who, since the day when he had frightened Katy into a fit, had touched no intoxicating liquor—"I'll be out there in a gif."

The two men started by the cross path—it was a quiet night, and the moon, just beginning to rise, lent a faint light. They had neared the cottage, by the kitchen side, when a dark form slid out of the shadow of the house, and, at the same time, a flash of

flame shone broadly against the building. An incendiary had been at work!

"You nab the man, and I'll see to the fire!" said Bent, in high excitement, but speaking softly to Green.

Green diverged from their path, and went, in long leaps, like a hound on the track, after the fugitive, who seemed to get on but slowly in his escape.

Bent flew to the cottage; tow, pine-shavings, tarred sticks, and kerosene had been freely used to ignite the wooden building, and were taking fine effect.

"Fire! Fire! FIRE!" roared Bent, kicking at the front door, and seizing a rake, which stood on the back porch, and beginning to drag away the pile of combustibles. In a moment Rappé Wade was out beside him, and soon Aunt Grace, Philippa, and maid, with wet blankets and buckets full of water.

The shouting attracted a few wakeful men from the works, and when they arrived on the scene they found Bent and Mr. Wade, with crowbar and axe, tearing the burning boards from the house side, and the woman throwing water. In a few minutes the fire was conquered—a dozen charred boards, a blackened window-frame, a burned door still marked the incendiary's work; and even at the instant when it could be thus summed up, Luke Green appeared, almost carrying the sinner in his arms—Jem Cope, the bar-tender.

"Well, here's a pretty showing for you," cried one.

"Dead Set for State's prison, for we saw you at it!" cried Bent.

"Yes, he's in for it, sure enough," observed Green.

"And folks as never harmed you!" cried a bystander. "To burn a house over the heads of a family of women and children just on winter's edge, as you may say. It's my idea, as men ought to hang for arson."

Thus Jen got no sympathizers, and was in a state of abject horror; his knees shook under him; his face was ghastly; his heart beat wildly; his breath came in short gasps.

Next question was, what to do with Jen for the night. The following day he could be carried to the county seat and committed to await his trial; but where to put him for this night? It was now one o'clock.

"I have it boss," said Bent, "your smoke-house is just the place"—he pointed to a solid little brick building, with an iron roof and door, and a small, barred window in the top. "He'll be safe there; let's put him in."

None of them saw an old woman, with a face of agony, hiding behind a clump of junipers, at the outskirts of the group. The old woman's anguished eyes scanned every face, and read condemnation and anger on all but one. That exception was the face of Philippa—where intense compassion for the terrified criminal seemed to vanquish all other feelings. It was Philippa who spoke out:

"Then if you put him in there, you must put the cot in for him to rest on."

"The floor's good enow for the likes o' him," said Green.

"But the floor is all ashes. Brown, bring the cot from the front attic; we must not be cruel to him."

So the cot was set in the smoke-house, and then Jem Cope was thrust in there, and the iron door was locked, and Rappé Wade laid the key on the sitting-room table.

"My good friends," said Rappé, "go home. Thank you for the interest you have shown, and for saving my house. I am sure poor Cope would not have thought of playing me this evil turn if it had not been for the influence of drink."

"Mebbly not," said Bent, "but drunkenness can't be pleaded in excuse for crime. It's only one crime more to the account."

"Well, good-night, boss, and safe sleep to ye all!" and the men trooped off to the village.

The woman behind the junipers, tears pouring over her wrinkled face, drew her mantle over her gray hairs, and sat down like Kizpah watching behind her dead, hers was the attitude of one long used to patient waiting.

The Wade family shut their doors; then all sought their rooms but Philippa; she concluded to recline in a large chair in the sitting-room until morning; she was wakeful and distressed, and it seemed to afford Katy vast comfort that aunt Philippa would watch until morning; the child felt sure that with aunt Philippa watching, neither the fire nor the man could break out.

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