

Choice Literature.

THE RUSCH FAMILY.

BY WILLIS BRUCE DOWD.

CHAPTER II.

It is strange how some things cling to a man's memory. I never could get the Rusch family out of my head. During one entire year I thought of them almost daily, sometimes reproaching myself for not having made greater effort to help them, and I made a few ineffectual efforts to find them. The more I thought of the poor old woman and unfortunate little girl, the more I desired to learn what had become of them, and to do something for them. I thought I owed it to myself as a duty to find them. So I began to look for them in earnest. I looked in the directory, and found several Rusches in it, as residing in the city. To every one of these persons I sent a type-written letter, containing such statements and making such inquiries as I thought necessary to find the parties whom I wished to see. My efforts in this direction were a failure. I went to look up young Rusch at the bar room on Ninth Avenue, where I first found him, but he was not there. The people there said they knew nothing of his whereabouts.

I next tried advertising in the newspapers, but failed at that also, and finally despaired of finding the Rusch family.

Then I resumed my routine life, working closely at my practice, and almost forgot the Rusches. One morning in December, 1885, I was going down town on the elevated cars, and reading my favourite newspaper, as usual, when my eyes fell on these startling words, printed in large letters at the head of a column: "A Shocking Crime. Henry Rusch, under the influence of liquor, commits a frightful murder."

I was excited. "That may be my man," said I. About twelve o'clock I went to the Tombs and saw the prisoner, for he was confined there. It was the man for whom I had looked so long. He was dirtier even than he was the last time I saw him. His beard had grown longer; he was a brutal, repulsive-looking fellow. He recognized me, frowned and refused to talk to me at first, but at length I prevailed upon him to speak. This is the substance of what he said:

"After I quit the job you got for me I went back to the bar room and spent nearly all my time there, as I had done before you found me. For a time I lost track of my mother and little girl. Lena came to me one day in the bar-room, and said: 'Papa, you must come home; grandma is almost dead.' I went home and found that my little one had not mistated the facts. My mother was sick in bed, the first time I had known her to be down in years. I could see in her wasted form that she was not far from death's door. She was too feeble to speak, but stretched out her hand to me, and smiled faintly, showing her pleasure at seeing me again. I remained with her quite a week. She did not die. In some mysterious way she improved from the day of my return, and, though she had not the nourishment she needed, she was soon almost as well as usual. As soon as I saw that she had recovered her strength, what little she had, I relapsed into my old habits. I abandoned her and Lena. One day a pal of mine said to me, 'See here, Rusch, you are a nice chap, ain't you? Why don't you go and feed your mother and child and pay their rent? I hear they have been served with notice to quit again.'

"That was about the end of last month. I didn't like the idea of having my mother and child put out of doors in the cold. They had been put out several times before, but never in severe weather. I went to them and promised to reform, and then to the landlord and begged him to allow them to remain. It was too late. I was called a wretch, a scoundrel, a worthless cur. I thought I would show my pluck my sticking to my people in the time of their need. So when the day came to move I was there. It was dreadfully cold. They put my mother's few remaining articles of furniture and bedding, worthless things that no one dared to take from her, on the sidewalk, in the snow. My mother and Lena wept, seeing themselves thrust out into the world again. I took each by a hand, and led them away; my little girl sobbed and said: 'Where are you going, papa? Where shall we find a home and food?' I could not answer her questions. I had no money. I was no better than a beggar. All the forenoon I led them about through the streets, aimlessly. They suffered intensely from the cold, and so did I. At length I begged some food and we sat under a shed to eat it. When we had finished I left them and went to the bar room on Ninth Avenue where you found me, and asked the boss for money to help me take care of my mother and Lena for a few days. He cursed me and called me a lying dog, and said I only wanted money to spend somewhere else for drink. 'Here,' said he, 'if you want whiskey, take this and get out of here.' With that he handed me a pint flask of liquor, and I took it, thinking at first that I might sell it and get 50 cents for it, and so get food, or else that it might serve a good purpose in stimulating all of us during our exposure in the snow. But I had scarcely left the bar room when the biting cold made me think of taking a drink of the whiskey, and I did so. One drink led to another, until I had emptied the bottle. I got quite drunk.

"My inflamed mind revolted at the thought of my having to care for mother and Lena. For several hours I wandered about the streets in a hopeless way, muttering absurd and wicked speeches to myself, and cursing those who came near me. Toward evening the snow that had ceased began falling again. Then my conscience—for I had some conscience left—began to hurt me, and I wandered back in search of my mother and child. At last I found them. My little girl ran to me, and put her arms around my neck, sobbing, 'Papa, papa, I'm so cold and hungry. Give me some bread.' That was a pitiable cry to hear. And then she ran away from me, with a strange,

wild look in her eyes, seeing that I was intoxicated, and took refuge in mother's arms. Mother had not said a word or changed expression since I entered the shed. But now she rose slowly and stood before me, erect and stern. I was sitting down when she got up. My heart beat fast when I saw the hard, cold look on her face. She never looked so before.

"My son," said she in German, 'you left us here in the cold and went away to find bread for us. We have suffered all day. You have gone to a bar room and got drunk, while we were here waiting for you to bring us food. That was a cruel thing for you to do. You have neglected us a long time; you have left us alone to live upon the charity of the world or 'die. You shall not keep us waiting for your help longer. We shall leave you now. You must not follow us. We do not want to see you again.'

"At that moment a terrible determination came into my head. I determined to kill my mother and Lena to get them out of their misery. So, without saying a word, I rose, taking in my right hand a thick piece of timber that lay near me, and hit my mother a furious blow on the head. She gasped and fell at my feet, the blood pouring from her mouth and nose and from the wound I had inflicted on her brow. Lena screamed and ran away in the darkness before I could strike her. Then the horrifying thought of what I had done came over me, and I fled, knowing that I had killed my mother. Oh, God! What a crime that was!"

"Go on," said I, impatiently, "Had you actually killed her?"

"Yes," said he, the tears running down his face. "It is for that I am here now. It is too late to repent now, I know, but a man can't become too mean to remember and regret."

"And what has become of Lena?" I inquired, anxious for the welfare of the unhappy child.

"I don't know," said he. "I never saw her again. I do not know whether she is alive or dead."

"This is a terrible story, Rusch," said I. "You have done a great wrong. It is as much as I can say in truth that I pity you in the agony you must feel in consequence of the crime you have committed, and am sorry the good of the community can only be preserved by your personal punishment."

With that I left him.

I went from the presence of the culprit, and from the dark cell where the story of his crime had been told me, more depressed than I had been in a long time. I felt that all my anxiety for the welfare of Rusch himself, and more especially of his mother and child, had been useless, a waste of spiritual energy. A melancholy conviction came to me that many of my best purposes in life might be wasted in the same way, not through lack of effort on my part, but because my powers might be sadly incommensurate with the time and place and circumstances with which I should have to deal. But I came out of my despondency feeling that this single great disappointment must be of service to me in some way, if I only endeavoured to utilize it properly. And I resolved that my failure to help the mother and son should not prevent my endeavouring to help the little girl, Lena.

CHAPTER III.

I made a thorough search for Lena. I made inquiries personally at several of the orphan and half-orphan asylums in this city. To others I sent letters asking if any one answering her description had been sent to them recently. I notified the police of her loss, and applied to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children for assistance in finding her. Nowhere was there a trace of her to be found. I began to walk the streets and to frequent employment agencies and other places in search of her. One evening in May, of last year, 1887, as I was coming home from my day's work, and walking along 14th Street toward Fifth Avenue; it was about six o'clock in the evening, for that is my usual hour for returning from my office; I passed an elderly gentleman and a little girl, walking hand in hand, in the same direction with me. I only got an imperfect view of them as I passed, but the moment my eyes fell on the girl's face, I said inwardly, "That is Lena." I did not want to appear rude in approaching her; so I walked on to the corner of University Place and then waited for them to catch up with me and pass me. I wanted to get a better view of Lena, and be sure it was she, before approaching her. When they came near me the child looked at me steadily, and when she saw that my look was fastened on her she clung closer to the gentleman, as if for protection. Her lustrous black eyes had that affrighted look in them that I had seen before when I went to collect rent from her grandmother in the tenement house. I knew she recognized me. The gentleman followed her gaze in my direction, and seeing me, paused, asking Lena, "What is the matter, dear? Do you know the man?" I could hear her answer, also, "Yes, sir, and I'm afraid of him."

The time had come for me to speak. I went up to them and said to the gentleman: "You must excuse me, sir, I have been looking for Lena a long time. My anxiety has been very great to learn how she fared after the death of her grandmother. I have endeavoured to find her and have wanted to help her. May I detain you long enough to hear from her own lips how she has been and is?"

"May I inquire who you are?" the gentleman asked, very courteously.

I told him who I was.

Then he held out his hand to me and smiled. I knew that he was a warm-hearted, elegant gentleman at once; there was no mistaking that in his erect carriage, gray hair and moustache, and ruddy skin, in his grace and dress. He told Lena to shake hands with me, which she did. Then he pressed me to accompany them home, saying that he would insure Lena's telling me a story that would repay me for my trouble. I assented willingly. We crossed Union Square, went down 17th Street to St. George's Church, and entered a house facing Stuyvesant Park. As

soon as we entered the mansion I knew that I was in the home of a wealthy man. There was an elegant abundance of rich furniture, bronzes, bric-a-brac, statuary, paintings, etchings. The gentleman led me into the parlour, then excused himself, and went to look for his wife. Directly they returned together, both radiant with smiles, and the husband said, putting his hand on the shoulder of his wife and pushing her forward, very gently,

"This is Lena's new mother," he said.

There are some people whom you cannot help loving from the start, and this man and woman were two of them. They treated me as cordially and well as if I had been an old friend. And nothing would do but I must stay for tea with them. Lena warmed toward me gradually, and became very friendly with me in the course of the evening.

"Now, Lena," said I, taking one of her hands in mine, as we sat on a sofa together, "I want you to begin and tell me in your own words what you did that dark night when you ran away in the snow, and how you came to be here."

"I don't want to talk about it," said she, looking distressed, and playing with my fingers. I was instantly sorry I had asked her to do it.

"Tell him, dear," said the rosy-cheeked, white-haired lady, the wife of my newly-found friend—"tell the gentleman your story, dear," said she. "He has felt a great deal of interest in you, and has wanted to help you. Are you not grateful?"

Lena lifted her child's face to mine and kissed me. "I'll tell you," said she, putting her head against my shoulder. For it must be remembered that Lena had not been brought up in a manner to make her entirely childish; there was that innocent gravity about her we often observe in children who have had responsibilities thrown upon them early. And she spoke the English language imperfectly, of course, though she had been sent to school, and could read a little in our tongue. With all this, it might be said she was an intelligent, sympathetic child, quick to adapt herself to circumstances, especially where warm hearts prepared the way for her. This is the substance of what she told me:

"When I saw my papa strike grandma, and saw her fall, I knew she was killed, and I was afraid papa would kill me too, so I screamed and ran away. It was a dark, cold night, you know, and snow was on the ground. I had no place to go and get warm and sleep, so I wandered through the streets a long time. I saw a policeman, and wanted to ask him to help me, but I was afraid of him, he was so big and rough looking. At last I began to cry, and didn't know what to do; so I sat down on a front stoop in the snow and cried myself almost to sleep. It must have been midnight, and I was very cold. After I had sat there a long time a large German woman came along and said to me: 'What is the matter, sissy?' and I told her I was cold and hungry. She asked me some more questions and I answered them, but I didn't say anything about what papa had done, for I was afraid to do it; and finally she took me home with her. She lived in a tenement house where we had lived once, and she gave me something to eat and put me in bed, and soon I was fast asleep. The next morning I heard the people talking about the murder of my grandmother; of course they did not call her that, but I knew what they said, and I was afraid that they would find out from me that I was there and saw it; so, after dinner, about one o'clock, I ran away and began to walk about in the streets again. As night came on I wanted to get as far as I could from that awful place, so I walked down Eighth Avenue to 23rd Street and then across to Third Avenue, and then down town again until I came to Stuyvesant Square. I was walking in front of the big church out there when I stopped and read the sign in big white letters at the entrance. This is what it said: 'Come in; rest and pray.' The doors were open and the church was lighted up. I stood there looking at the words on the sign, and finally I said: 'Well, if you ask me to come in and rest, I will, but I can't pray; I don't know what that means. I have never been in a church before.' So I went in and climbed up on one of the seats. At first I felt uneasy and afraid they would put me out, but the people who came in passed me and looked at me with smiles on their faces, and none of them spoke to me. Then the music began and I listened to that, but directly a man got up and began to talk, and I was so tired and sleepy I just tucked myself up in a corner and went to sleep. The next thing I knew the people were all going out, the organ was playing, and a nice, kind-looking gentleman was stooping over me and telling me to wake up and go home. And who do you suppose that was?" she broke off abruptly, looking up at me with a suppressed smile on her face.

"I cannot possibly imagine," said I, in such a way as to make her see my exaggeration.

"It was my dear new papa!" she exclaimed, breaking from my arms and running to her good parent, and throwing her arms around his neck.

"She has told you her part of the story," said the rosy-cheeked little woman, her new mother, "but she has not told you our part of it. My husband and I have been married over thirty years. We have had only one child, a daughter who had dark hair and eyes like Lena's there; she resembled her father very much. She grew to be a beautiful young woman, but we had the misfortune to lose her in her twenty-third year, only a few months ago." Her death was almost an unbearable misfortune to us—it left a great void in our hearts and home. When Lena opened her eyes and looked at my husband in church that night, she reminded me very much of our Grace when she was about that age—there was only a general expression of the face that recalled my own child's features to me. My husband noticed it also. When we heard Lena's story, for she told us some of it there, and had made more inquiries into her history, we decided to adopt her. We have had her with us now several months and we have grown fond of one another. We shall live and be happy together all the remainder of our days; shall we not dear?"

The child ran to her, and kissed her, and said, very modestly, and sweetly indeed, "Yes, mamma dear."