







THE INTEMPERATE BLACKSMITH.

(From "Parochial Sketches of Avondale," by the Rev. J. A. Beckel, B.A.)

Numerous are the vices to which weak and erring men willingly sacrifice their health, their substance, their happiness here and their hopes hereafter; the giant vice—Intemperance, stands forth pre-eminent; for, like the poisonous plague-spot, it spares neither age, sex, nor condition; but engulfs in one absorbing vortex of ruin and degradation the young and old—the rich and the poor; the delicate form of beauty and the sterner mould of manly vigour—the mind darkened by the gloom of ignorance and the intellect enlightened by the rays of genius and expanded by the graces of education—all sink alike beneath its Lethian influence, and so uniform is its progress and result that the tale of one becomes, with little variation, the tale of all.

The subject of the following sketch, whom, for distinction's sake, we will call Arnold, was the only son of an honest and industrious couple, who occupied a few acres of land situated at an outlying hamlet, belonging to the parish of Avondale. Like two many fond but misguided parents, they indulged their darling boy to the full extent of their humble means; and instead of subjecting his earlier years to wholesome restraint and the acquirement of habits of industry and frugality, they permitted him to follow the bent of his own inclinations, and grow up in ignorance and idleness.

On attaining his fourteenth year, the impulse of the moment induced him to present himself before the officiating minister of the parish as a candidate for the rite of confirmation, when his ignorance obliged the examiner to refuse the usual certificate. This refusal, though accompanied with an offer of personal assistance in acquiring the necessary amount of knowledge, excited the bitterest feelings in the breast of the misguided youth, and led to a course of annoyance towards his supposed enemy, though, in fact, his best friend, which in less forgiving hands would have subjected the perpetrator to punishment from the laws of his country. This forbearance, however, only added fuel to the fire, and on arriving at that point beyond which forbearance would be a vice instead of a virtue, the clergyman informed his parents, that, unless they forthwith adopted some stringent course to check the vicious propensities of their son, he should feel it his duty to make his conduct the subject of a magisterial investigation.

In consequence of this determination, the boy was apprenticed to the hereditary blacksmith of a distant village, who was not only a worthy and industrious man, but a strict disciplinarian; and so judicious was his management, that, at the expiration of his apprenticeship, a period of six years, Edward Arnold returned to his native village with the reputation of being a good tradesman and an altered man. About this time he formed an attachment to the only daughter of the head gardener at Avondale Park, and as the parents of the young couple approved of the connection, and possessed the means of establishing them in business, it was arranged with the hereditary blacksmith of Avondale (for, in rural villages, these "stones of work," as they call them, descend from father to son), a bachelor of some four-score years, that, for certain weighty considerations, the honours and emoluments of his anvil should be transferred to the care of Edward Arnold.

As soon as the young tradesman was settled in the house attached to the smithy, the marriage took place amid the congratulations of their mutual friends, who predicted a long career of happiness to the young and amiable bride. The stroke of work to which Arnold had succeeded was principally confined to the repair of agricultural implements and the shoeing of horses and oxen employed for the several purposes of husbandry. This description of work required his constant personal attendance, without obliging him to leave the precincts of his home; and from daylight to dark the echo from his anvil was heard in the distance, and he never allowed the thoughtless or the idle to congregate around his forge. His wife faithfully seconded his exertions; their cottage presented a picture of neatness worthy the imitation of their rustic neighbours; while she, the presiding genius, performed her household duties with a cheerfulness of manner and a dexterity of method as clearly proved the care bestowed on her earlier years, and the judicious nature of the parental management which so ably qualified her to discharge the duties of wife and mother.

Passing over a period of ten years, during which time their union had been blessed by the birth of two children—the eldest, a boy then in his eighth year; and the youngest, an infant of tender age—we come down to the time when a change in the conduct of Arnold was gradually presenting itself to the notice of the whole village. An increase of work had obliged him to engage an assistant, who, like too many of his class, allowed the indulgence of intemperate habits to waste the reward of his toil and the gains of his mechanical genius. At his solicitation, Arnold was induced to be present at one of their bacchanalian meetings, held at a roadside house situated in a neighbouring parish; his entrance was greeted with a shout of noisy welcome, and so much deference was paid by the whole party to their new visitor, that his vanity overcame his better judgment, prompted him to become a member of their club, with the promise of presiding at their next meeting. The poisonous venom once inhaled, though slow in progress, was sure and deadly in effect. The echo from his anvil sounded with less regularity, and the general arrangement of his smithy presented the appearance of disorder, which marks the workshop of the intemperate or indolent tradesman. The change in his personal appearance was no less perceptible—the manly form of health and strength gradually declined beneath the enervating influence of his maddening excesses, which, in a few short years, left nothing but the outline of his former self. His attendance at church became less frequent, and at length ceased altogether; while the pleasure which he formerly experienced in the society of his wife, and the gratification of his children, seemed changed to disgust and abhorrence. But was there no predilect cause to produce this fatal change? The superficial observer of human nature may be inclined to ask, "Yes!"—I answer—No!—the mistaken kindness of his parents! The inclination to do evil, which we all inherit as a common birthright—not being nipped in the bud of childhood, but allowed to germinate in the bloom of approaching manhood—acting on a mind whose moral and intellectual powers had not been developed in a corresponding ratio—rendered its possessor the victim of impulse in pursuing vice or virtue as chance or design presented them to his notice.

Thus the conduct of Edward Arnold, during his apprenticeship, was the result of the example set and the course pursued by his master—he was virtuous because his immediate associate was so. Again, during the first years of his marriage, not being exposed to temptation, and influenced by the presence and example of his wife, he continued to pursue the same course; but no sooner does vice assert her presence in the person of his fellow-workman than this child of impulse yields to the first attack. His acquired habits quickly give way beneath the influence of those implanted in his breast by nature, which, though dormant for years, have never been thoroughly eradicated by the inculcation of moral or Christian principles, but allowed to smoulder without expiring, ready to be re-activated by the first breath of vicious example.

But to return to my parishioner. Experience has taught me that no vice more quickly brutalizes human nature than intemperance. It appears to call into existence at the time of its adoption every passion and pursuit calculated to degrade our common nature, and to dismiss every nobler feeling which distinguishes the rational from the irrational creature.

Such was its influence on Edward Arnold. Six months had scarcely elapsed from his first visit to the roadside public-house, when his conduct, in connection with his degraded associates, became the subject of a magisterial investigation. He usually left his home

warmth—that thorough humiliation—the degraded conviction of our utter unworthiness—absence of merit in ourselves, which, in the conduct of the sincere and practical, so long as he felt himself to be hovering on the verge of the grave, so long did he receive my visits, and interest in my conversation on the covenant established and ratified by the Saviour's blood; but no sooner did comparative health enable him to leave his bed and receive the visits of his former associates, than he formally declined all further intercourse.

On my last visit I found him surrounded by four of his former companions, who were about to commence a drunken debauch in honour of his host's recovery. Of course I immediately withdrew; but, before doing so, addressed my parishioner in the following words:—"I am, as in duty bound, and have faithfully endeavoured to explain to you the Gospel of Christ. That God, whom you have dishonoured by your long career of vice and crime, and who has given you one warning which you have neglected, and which you have made a means of still further dishonouring Him by your false professions, is a God of vengeance as well as of mercy: beware lest this trifling with His mercy should excite His vengeance and induce Him to cut you off without further warning—to summon you to His presence with your sins unrepent of and unforgiven; and remember that solemn declaration of Scripture—'The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God!'"

From this time I rarely encountered this wretched man, who became, in his personal appearance, so little more to look upon than the very children would cease their sports and turn with disgust from this living emblem of vice and crime!

He continued to follow the same course, and about six months after our last interview, in returning from his usual debauch, his horse and cart arrived at the cottage door without their master; and, on a search being made along the road, the lifeless body of my parishioner was discovered, his head literally crushed to pieces, and his whole person encircled by a pool of blood.

So lived—so died—Edward Arnold, the willing victim of intemperance!—a disgrace to his family, his species, and himself—and so will live and die all who are content to immolate themselves on the altar of this deadly vice.

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