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THE WHITE LADY;

OR, WHAT THE THRUSH SAID.

CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd)

He was a quiet little fellow, and I was glad of his company. We shared our coppers while they lasted, and when they were spent we foraged for food by day and slept in the streets by night. Sometimes we got a box to carry, or a horse to hold, and earned a few pence by that. But bread was dear, and times were hard, and we could barely keep body and soul together.

I could get no work. Trade was slack, many men were out of employment, and my ignorance of the city, as well as my provincial dialect, were against me. I sold my spare shirt, then my waistcoat; then I sold my new boots and bought some old ones, netting a shilling on the exchange, but at the end of a week we were at the end of our tether, and starvation stared us in the face.

It was a Friday night, wet and dismal, and after many fruitless efforts to earn the price of a crust, we stole into a court off Drury Lane, and went to sleep in a doorway which afforded some shelter from the rain.

When I awoke in the morning I found myself alone. Harry had gone, and had pinned to my coat his note of farewell, written on a bit of the margin of a newspaper. The note said simply:

Good-bye; I'm off. Thank you for being so good to me. Look to yourself. I will try the road. Keep up your spirits.—Yours,

Harry.

P.S.—If you can't hold out, try the soldiers.

It was useless to look for him. He might be miles away by this. I walked down to the dock gates and tried for a job; but there was a crowd, and the men shouldered me out of their way, each one trying to get first, and I was too miserable to fight. Why should I? What did it matter? I left the docks and wandered about the streets till nightfall, when I made my way to the police-office to ask for a ticket for the casual ward at Clerkenwell Workhouse; for it was raining, and the wind was cold, and I was wearied out.

There was a strange mob of vagrants camping round the entrance to the police-office waiting for the doors to open. I sat down on the pavement close to a middle-aged woman in a ragged frock and a dirty red shawl. She was a swarthy woman, her skin tanned by long exposure to the weather. She wore no bonnet, and was smoking a short black pipe. I watched her for some time, and thought what a bold, hard, wicked face she had, and at length, more from curiosity to hear her speak than from any desire for information, I ventured to ask her a question about the tickets.

She turned upon me with a scowl, which gradually melted away, as she looked at me, and at last said, not unkindly, "What do you want to know for, boy? You're not going to Clerkenwell, are you?"

I said I was. She sat smoking for a few minutes, then took her pipe from her lips, and stroking her chin with her great brown hand, said, very much to my surprise, "You mustn't; no, you mustn't. You're only a boy, and not used to no kind o' wickedness, I can see. Don't you go, boy; don't you go."

"I have no other place to sleep," I said.

She shook her head. "Sleep in the streets; boy, sleep on the bridges; anywhere but there. It's the worst workhouse in all London. No, you mustn't go."

"But you are going," I hinted.

The woman laughed. "Oh, me," she said. "It's good enough for me. But you are different. Ah, don't be stubborn. Take an old woman's advice. It's a cruel place. Don't go, don't go."

"I'm not a child," I said.

She laughed again, not pleasantly, and answered, "You know nothin', nothin'. I know it all. Been through it all."

Then, very earnestly, she continued, leaning closer to me; "Be advised now. Be told. I know these places; and I've had sons of me own. Don't go, don't go. D'ye hear?"

I rose up wearily from the pavement. "I will take your advice," I said.

She nodded, and put the pipe back in her mouth. "Good," she said, "good boy. Now you're talkin'," and turned her attention another way.

I wandered through the mud and rain as far as London Bridge. Then, being wet and cold, I turned into one of the recesses, and was about to take possession of a corner when, reaching out my hand, I felt it pushed away, and a girl's voice said, "What do you want? Find a place of your own."

I turned away, but as I left the recess I looked back, and saw a young girl sitting up against the wall of the bridge looking at me. She was thinly clad, bareheaded, and without shawl. The rain was falling steadily, and the east wind was chilly enough for March. It was no wonder, then, that the girl shivered and huddled herself together in her dismal corner.

I left her and crossed the bridge, but the wan face, so thin, so very young, seemed constantly before my eyes, and I returned and spoke to her.

"What are you doing there?" I asked.

She answered my question by asking another—"Who are you?"

"An outcast, like yourself," I said.

She stood up, and coming close to me, looked fearlessly in my face. "I see," she said; "you're lodging on the wrong side of the door. Have you got a bit of bread about you?"

I shook my head. The girl, with a shiver and a sigh, turned away and sat down again in her corner. "Well," she said, "blood's warm, chummy; come and sit aside o' me."

I sat beside her, putting my arms around her, and she nestled against my shoulder, and we were friends directly. She was an affectionate little creature, and as grateful for my company as I was for hers. Leaning her wet hair against my breast, and holding my right hand clingingly in her cold, damp fingers, she told me, in the plaintive East-London tone, the history of her young unhappy life.

I was touched to the quick, and felt as though I would have given my life most cheerfully to save her from the tender mercies of that cruel city. But I was penniless, friendless; I could not help her. I could only comfort her. I put myself between her and the wind. I tied my neckerchief over her head, and holding her close to me used all the words of sympathy and kindness which such an uncouth fellow as I could command, and so she fell asleep, and slept for hours in the wind and rain, while I sat watching her and wondering how in wealthy London such things might be.

Very early in the morning the market carts began to rumble over the bridge. The child-woman awoke, and looked at me with a smile.

"We must go," she said; "early risin' an' late breakfasts is the rule in this hotel." She got up shivering, and tried to straighten her hair with her fingers.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"With you, if you like," she said; "neither of us has nothin'; and we might as well share."

I shook my head. "No," said I, "not that. Let me see if I can get a few coppers for you."

"You're not going to give me the slip?" she said.

"No."

"I'm nothing to nobody, I ain't," she said, her eyes filling with tears; "but you won't leave a poor girl all alone, will you, chummy?"

I said I would come back if I was alive. She gave me her hand then, and I bent down and kissed her. I had never kissed a woman before. And, bidding her cheer up, I set off across the bridge.

When I had gone a hundred yards or so I heard a whistle, and looking back saw the little creature standing on the seat of the bridge waving my neckerchief as a signal of farewell.

And then, thinking of my sister, who had been a mother to me—God bless her—I went down to the Tower Gates and enlisted for a soldier.

And so poor Carrie got a splendid shilling.

CHAPTER VII.

I had not the heart to tell poor Carrie what I had done, or that I was going away from her for good. I gave her the shilling, and saying I had some work to do, and would meet her in the evening, bade her good-bye. She stood at the end of the bridge, a little way out of the crowd, with the shilling clasped in her hand, and her eyes fixed upon me with a strangely wistful look, as she echoed my "good-bye," and then the great human river swallowed her up and I saw her no more.

But the expression of her eyes haunted me, and my heart ached at the recollection. It was a strange look, and had in it something more than sadness. I know now what I only dimly imagined then, that in the gloomy world of poverty there are so many souls starved to death for lack of love as bodies for lack of food. In a city of three million Christians that poor girl was famishing for one little morsel of human sympathy.

Two days after I and five other pieces of social drift-wood were locked up in a cattle-van on the South-Western Railway and bundled off to Devonport to join the South Munster Regiment.

We reached barracks about six in the evening, and were taken before the sergeant-major, who eyed us disparagingly, asked which prison we had escaped from, and told the orderly to "March 'em to the tramp-ward and lend 'em a long scrubber and some sand till they clane themselves."

The receiving-room, or tramp ward, as the sergeant-major called it, was very dull, and I soon became so melancholy that I could not bear to remain alone. I therefore walked out into the lines, and hearing loud shouts of laughter and a noisy babel of talk proceeding from a square brick house of one storey, I approached and found it was the canteen.

I went in. About a hundred soldiers, all dressed in shell jackets and the hideous Kilmarnock caps, were lounging on forms round a big, low-roofed room. Most of them were smoking short clay pipes, and all of them were drinking beer out of pewter pots.

The noise was deafening. Some were singing, some talking, or rather shouting, one was playing on a tin whistle, and in the centre of the crowd, where a ring had been cleared, two men, stripped to the waist, were fencing with single-sticks.

They were both big and powerful men, and well matched. They fought with a kind of savage good humor, giving and taking very severe hits without wincing, and all the while keeping up a great stamping and laughing, mixed with volleys of the most horrible imprecations. One of them had a great cut across the nose, and another just at the parting of his hair, from which the blood was trickling. His opponent's right arm was red and swollen, and across his face were two broad purple weals edged with crimson, which, added to the fact that he had only one eye, and that his teeth were large and prominent, gave him a very terrible appearance.

He was evidently a favorite with the crowd, who cheered him continually, calling to him by his sickname of "Blood an' Ouns," to "pale the hoide aff him," and to "make him smell timber." But once, when the other man got in a sharp cut on the ear, there arose a cry of "Well hit, Busther, sure he's no guard at all." To which "Blood an' Ouns" replied, with many oaths, "Thrue for yez, Banshee, darlin', but wait till I'm afther puttin' a new mouth an the roof av him, an' it's the dacent batin I'll give yez," and at that instant "Buster" received a terrific cut on the nose, and in the return broke his stick across his opponent's skull.

This ended the bout, and the two combatants, laughing, swearing and wiping the blood from their faces, made their way to the counter and called for half a gallon of porter, which was served in a tin can, from which they drank in turns.

As for me, I had seen enough, and was making my way to the door, when a hand was laid upon my shoulder. I turned and saw "Blood and Ouns" standing before me.

"Hould on there, 'cruity," said he; "yez belangs to us now, and'll be afther desoririn' to pay yere footin' out o' yere bounty, avick."

I went back to the counter and paid for half a gallon of beer, which was handed round amongst the dozen men who had followed me.

"Blood and 'Ouns," or, to give him his correct name, Dennis Cassidy, drank first.

"What's yere name, 'cruity?" he asked.

I said, "William Homer."

"Bedad, thin," said he, "we'll jist christen yez the Pilgrim for yere distinguished air o' misery. Have yez brought yere hands wid ye?"

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Mane, is it?" said Dennis, "I mane the use av thim, an' it's mighty green yez are. But this is an Oirish ridgiment, and ye'll jist 'ave to foight or turn tailor."

I said I was no fighting man, upon which Dennis shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and saying, "Thin plaze God yez needs be a good runner," turned and shouted to a tall young fellow at the other end of the room, "Micky, Micky, ye divil, come here avick, and make the welcome to this 'cruity."

The young soldier, with a broad, good-humored smile on his face, came over to me and held out his hand. "God save yez, 'cruity," he said, "and the divil make yez welcome."

I shook hands with him, and the next instant received a sharp box on the ear.

Dennis at once elbowed his way into the centre of the room. "A ring, boys, a ring!" he cried, and before I knew what was going on I found myself sitting on Buster's knee, while the young Irishman sat opposite to me on the knee of Dennis smiling pleasantly, as if the whole thing was a joke. As, indeed it was to the South Munster men.

I had no wish to fight, but I could not escape. I stood up sulkily and defended myself without striking back for some minutes, but a couple of nasty blows in the face and the jeers of the onlookers at my supposed cowardice roused my anger, and I made a sudden rush, hit out viciously, and sent my opponent down with a heavy blow on the temple.

Imagine my surprise when he jumped up laughingly and called out, "Well hit, 'cruity, give us yere mitten," and the other men applauded, and breaking up the ring, came crowding round me with hearty congratulations.

"Ye'll do, boy, ye'll do," said Dennis; "if ye'll only look more pleasant ye'll be a jool, and make it a rale trate for a comrade to foight wid yez."

But when I refused to drink with them they were fairly astonished, and I left Buster and Dennis standing with open mouths, and young Micky looking on with an expression which said plainly that he was deceived in me.

After this I went no more to the canteen, but sat in my own corner of an evening and moped dismally. In the daytime I was kept well employed at drill. The drill was almost incessant, and the drill instructors for the most part were brutal bullies. I hear that the army is much altered since my time. I am glad of it; there was abundant room for improvement.

CHAPTER VIII.

The worst of all the instructors was an English corporal named Bates. I conceived an intense hatred for this fellow at first sight, and he returned it. I could do nothing right for him, and as he generally drilled my squad, he managed to make my life more miserable than ever. Yet I was so melancholy and took such small heed of what passed around me that I never rebelled against his tyranny nor resented his insults, until one afternoon when, having exhausted all his stock of profanity, he suddenly rushed up to me and said:

"You blockhead! If your sister had no more sense than you——"

He never finished the sentence. Without a thought of the consequences I struck him, just as I had struck Black Jack, and he fell in a heap upon the gravel.

There was a lance-corporal named Ennis acting as assistant instructor, and this man, seeing his superior attacked, called out to the men of the squad to seize me. But my blood was up. I tripped one man, knocked another down, and ran across the parade and through the side gate into the road, with a dozen recruits at my heels.

It was a steep road, and at the head of it stood a sentry. As I approached he came to the charge, and called upon me to halt. I made a sudden turn, vaulted the wall into a field, and got into the high-road leading towards Saltash.

Here I had a straight run with a clear front, and behind me, at a distance of about fifty yards, the lance-corporal and men of my squad. For a time my pursuers kept well together and maintained a good speed; but after going about half a mile I looked back and saw that only two of them were likely to give me any trouble. These were two brothers named Daly. They were about the same distance behind me, and were coming on at a steady, swinging pace like practised runners.

I decided to try, first of all, to make the pace too hot for them, and failing that, to pump them out as much as I could, and then turn suddenly and attack them. Accordingly I put on a spurt for a hundred yards, and then looked round again. They had not responded. I had gained upon them, but they were still running with the same steady, business-like stride. They meant staying.

The road dipped at this point, running through a thick wood, where the birds were singing and where I could see the wild flowers gleaming amongst the trees as I passed them. Again I quickened my pace, and again I looked round, and saw the brothers coming on steadily, shoulder to shoulder. If I could only put land enough betwixt us I might slip them yet.

At the bottom of the hill was a little hamlet, with an inn on the right-hand side of the road, and before this inn a group of countrymen sat on benches drinking. As I came up at racing speed they rose, and one of them ran into the middle of the way to stop me. I made as if I would pass him on the left; but as he reached out his arm I doubled the other way, and catching him off his balance, pushed him into the dust. His companions burst into a hoarse laugh, and he got up and shook the dirt off his clothes, but made no attempt to follow me. And I ran on without looking back for a good quarter of an hour.

When I did look back the Dalys were nearly half a mile behind, but still coming on at the same rate. Ahead of me the road ran nearly straight, but as the cottages and gardens were getting more numerous along its edges, I concluded I must be nearing a village. I therefore turned off along a narrower road which branched to the left, and went on at my best pace for a good mile.

I was still running at my top speed, and had a nasty stitch coming in my side, when there sudenly appeared from a byway a butcher-boy driving rapidly in a light cart drawn by a strong mare.

I dropped into a walk at once, and as the cart came up with me called upon the boy to stop. He reinedf up, and asked me sharply what I wanted.

(To be continued.)

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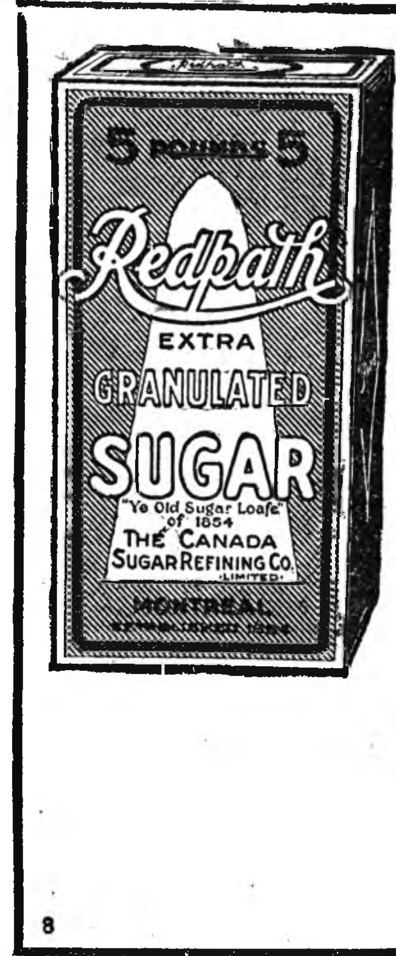

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