

The Fireside.

UPON DRY GROUND.

BY ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER.

"Eh! but it was a grand sermon to-night, a grand sermon," said Peter Blake, who was sipping his whiskey-punch, and smoking his clay pipe late one Sunday night, and consequently was inclined to look at life generally through rose-colored spectacles.

"Who preached, father?" asked Rhoda, his cherished and only child.

"Oh, a stranger, of course. We don't get such sermons from our own parson, goodness knows. Rhoda, I haven't patience with that fellow."

"And what was the sermon about, father?"

"It was all about the Israelites going through the Red Sea. The text was, 'And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground,' and the preacher showed how the Red Sea was a type of the sea of life, and that we ought to pass through it on dry ground, without letting the water of sin touch our feet or the hem of our garments. He said that the way for the ransomed to pass over was as dry as the way over the Red Sea, and that it was our duty to walk in that path, and to keep clear of the walls of water on either side of us. Oh! I wish you could have heard him, child. He worked it all in as neatly as a puzzle, and when he described the scene of the Hebrews going over the sea, upon my word, you could see it all for yourself."

The enmity betwixt Blake and his spiritual pastor had arisen in this wise: Peter was in many ways an excellent man, and the weak point in his armour was his fondness for his glass. Not that he ever got drunk—Peter would have scorned the action—but he took systematically more than was good for him, and nightly refused to retire to rest without his "night-cap" of whiskey-punch. And not only did he indulge in this pernicious habit, but he insisted on Rhoda's joining him, and having a small glass herself every night—a most unwise insistence in the upbringing of a motherless girl. The pastor had taken upon himself to remonstrate with this folly of Peter Blake's, and Peter had violently resented such interference; and had further informed the rebuking cleric that every man was his own master, and that if he (Peter) were so minded, he would not only drink whiskey-punch, but would wash in it; and he was mortally offended when the pastor pointed out that such a use of the liquid might do him less harm than the drinking thereof.

But on this special Sunday evening a stranger had preached at the parish church, much to the delight of Master Blake, who dearly loved to have his ears tickled with a good sermon. And as the appreciative listener was meditating upon the eloquent discourse by his own fireside, the combined fumes of the clay pipe and the whiskey-punch proved too much for him, and he dropped off into a sound slumber. Then it came to pass that he dreamed a wonderful dream.

He dreamed that he saw a strange crossing swept across a dark and dreadful sea; the black waters stood up like walls on either side, but the pathway was quite dry and shone like gold, and the crossing-sweepers were white-robed angels, who, with their golden brooms,

made a way for the ransomed to pass through the waves of this troublesome world upon dry ground. The waters were dark and foul, but the angelic crossing-sweepers drove them back, so that they should not even stain the feet or soil the garments of travellers passing that way. On the other side of the crossing was a golden street, leading through pearly gates to the eternal city; and Peter perceived that the angels swept the crossing so clean that its sands shone almost as brightly as the pavement of the golden street beyond. But some of the travellers persisted in wandering so near to the edge of the pathway that their feet were met with the filthy water, and then they carried the mud on to the crossing, and so all the sweepers' work was wasted; for though the sand shone like the heavenly street when it was dry, the minute that a drop of water touched it, it turned into vile, earthly mud, and then the angels had much ado to sweep it clean again. Peter also perceived that when a traveller reached the further shore, the porters of the pearly gates looked to see if his shoes and garments were clean. If they were, he straightway entered the gates, amid much rejoicing and ringing of bells, but if he had brought some of the unclean mud clinging to him, the door-keepers sorrowfully shook their heads, for none might tread the shining streets whose steps could in any way defile their purity. Then the disappointed wayfarers had to turn away and go elsewhere, whither Peter knew not, to find if peradventure they might yet become clean enough to walk in white in the eternal city.

There was one man whose peculiar behaviour practically attracted Peter Blake's notice. This remarkable person kept clear of the over-curling walls of water—but he carried in his hand a small watering-can, with which he continually sprinkled the golden sands, mottling them, wherever his unholy baptism fell, with little splashes of mud. No sooner had one of the angel-sweepers burnished anew the golden path for some fresh traveller, than this pestilent fellow followed after him with his watering-can, and marred the way with unsightly patches of slush, so that the wayfarers could not keep their footsteps clean in spite of all the efforts of the white-robed crossing sweepers. Peter was astonished beyond measure at the long-suffering of the angels, who never interfered with the man, but strove patiently to repair the mischief he had wrought. But, alas! they oftentimes strove in vain, for when once a traveller's feet had walked through the sludge no angel's broom could brush them clean again. That was beyond the powers of even angelic crossing-sweepers.

Suddenly Peter Blake's attention was riveted by the sight of his own Rhoda starting to go over the wonderful crossing. He was delighted to see that the angels had swept it extra clean for her, so that her little feet seemed to be treading a pathway of burnished gold. His only child was the very apple of Peter's eye, and he watched his own little pilgrim's progress with all a parent's anxiety. It was a comfort to him to note that she kept far away from the huge, overhanging waves, which looked as if they would fall every minute and engulf all beneath them; but what was

his horror to perceive that the wretched man with the watering-can was walking in front of Rhoda, and spotting the yellow pathway before her with his horrid little splashes of mud. This was more than Master Blake could endure, especially when he noticed that the dark slime was beginning to attach itself to his own darling. So he expressed his indignation, in no measured terms, to a crossing-sweeper who happened to be standing near, and begged the shining one to intermeddle.

The angel shook his head sorrowfully. "Yes, it is very sad," he said, "but we can do nothing. We are not permitted to interfere."

"Not permitted to interfere!" exclaimed Peter. "Why, I know I'd soon interfere if I were you." He was so excited about Rhoda that he quite forgot he was speaking to an angel.

But the crossing-sweeper was too sorry to be offended.

"Don't you see," continued Peter, "that the fellow's filthy can is dirtying the path which my Rhoda has to tread, so that when she reaches the other side her garments will be soiled, and the door-keepers will refuse to open the gates to her? It is not only himself that the fellow is harming—no one would care about that—but it is my child who will suffer."

"I know," replied the angel. "That is the pity of it."

"Then why don't you speak to him?" shouted Peter.

"I cannot," sighed the crossing-sweeper, leaning sadly on his broom. "He would not like it. Every man is his own master, you see, and will have his own way. It seems a pity, I know, as nine times out of ten a man's own way is the wrong way; but a man will take his own course all the same. We angels cannot understand it."

But by this time Master Blake was in a perfect passion.

"Well, you see, it is my child, and not yours, that is being injured by that blundering fool!" he cried. "So I can tell you that if you don't interfere, I shall—and—"

"Wish you would," said the angel (very kindly, considering how rudely he had been spoken to). "Men are sometimes allowed to do things which are forbidden to us."

Then Peter Blake—unable to control his rage any longer—made straight for his enemy. He seized the culprit by the collar and began to shake him; but his arm fell numb by his side, and his indignation turned to horror, when he found that the man to whom he was about to deal such well deserved punishment was none other than—himself.

Peter staggered back as if thunder-struck, and in so doing knocked the watering-pot out of the culprit's hand, and behold! as it emptied its contents upon the sands at his feet, changing their gold into black slime and mud, he perceived that the vessel had been filled with hot whiskey-punch!

"Why, father," cried Rhoda's fresh young voice, "what a mess you have made! You have fallen asleep, and have upset your punch all over the carpet."

"Eh! so I have, so I have," said her father, gazing thoughtfully at the dark stain which was creeping over the pretty carpet towards Rhoda's feet. "Come away, come away!" he added hastily, clutching the girl by the arm, "or it will wet your shoes."

Rhoda laughed merrily. "It wouldn't hurt if it did; it is only spirits, dad." (But Rhoda had not seen what her father had seen).

"That is the worst of it, that it is

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only spirits," said Peter, still gazing in fascinated horror at the dark stain. "It is nasty stuff, Rhoda, nasty stuff! And understand, child, we'll never have another drop of it in the house as long as I live."

And Peter Blake kept his word. Whiskey-punch was never seen inside his doors again, but from that hour temperance and soberness were to be counted among the foremost of his excellences.

Peter Blake had seen the drink as the angels see it, and in all its dark iniquity he loathed now the unclean thing. The vision was never to be forgotten, and its consequences would affect eternity. He was, however, very anxious to convince both himself and Rhoda of the fact that the Vicar's interference had nothing—and less than nothing—to do with this sudden reformation in the matter of punch-drinking. But this was a thing of no moment, as the Vicar himself had the wisdom to perceive.

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