

Literature, &c.

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THE WEAVER'S HOME.

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It was a cold, bright December night, and the eve of national festivity. A gibbous moon was floating in serene beauty through the sky; and myriads of stars, like the kind eyes of ministering spirits, were keeping watch upon the earth. But only the lonely, the forsaken, the sick, or the romantic, could find time or inclination to gaze into the calm divine face of heaven that night. The multitude were all astir. Extraordinary preparations were being made to do befitting honor to that ancient anniversary of joy which the morning's sun would once more usher in.—All the great thoroughfares of the metropolis were lit up as if in rivalry of the noonday splendours, and a vast hurrying tide of humanity discharge itself through the gorged streets. The city presented the imposing appearance of a mighty mart. Almost all the population seemed to be converted for the time being into venders of buyers.

Especially was this the case throughout the entire extent of Shoreditch—that trading emporium, to which the tents of thousands of the poorer classes peopling that neighborhood are accustomed to resort for the purchase of their provisions. This spacious street exhibited the aspect of a fair. All the shops were brilliantly illuminated, and the windows most temptingly garnished with an abundance of those choice commodities, a participation in which is by every Englishman deemed indispensable to the proper observance of the festive rites of Christmas. All manner of clever artistic devices were exhibited, to attract attention and custom.—Ranged on the opposite edge of the pavement was another continuous line of rival stalls, tasteful miniature bazaars, and a motley host of salesmen, saleswomen, and juvenile traders—trafficking in all sorts of wares, from lace to lucifers, and from literature to bunches of onions; some of whom were stationary, while others were in perpetual motion; some mute and spiritless, but most of them clamorously importuning the patronage of every passer; some fast verging graveward by age or premature decay, and others just out of babyhood, compelled thus early to go forth and battle fiercely for a crust of honest bread; some had invested their entire capital in a small tray of trinkets, from the anticipated proceeds of which a large family depended for their night's shelter, and for subsistence on the morrow; while, besides all these, there was yet another grade of mendicant creatures, still more deeply and hopelessly sunken, who, lacking more honorable merchandise, were compelled to trade upon their miseries, and exhibit their starved looks, together with the ragged emblems of their wretchedness, for charitable coin.

Flanked on either side by this double battery of attraction and noisy solicitation, the crowd moved on, now briskly, and now sluggishly, according as the width of the pavement alternately broadened or contracted. All seemed to be swayed by one engrossing want. All this unusual out-door bustle had reference to the traditional festivities and goodly fellowship of the coming day. Though all other days in the year be dark, the poor English operative will, if possible, let in a few glimmering rays of joy and social cheer upon his Christmas hearth. He will pinch himself for weeks together, if he may but thereby see a bright fire burning in his grate, and an abundance of hospitable fare gracing his table, on that 'merrie' holiday occasion. But alas! often, in spite of their best efforts, a large number of unfortunate families are doomed to pass this season of enjoyment in unfriended desolation and want. Let us take an example.

Look for a moment into the midst of that agitated stream of life. See that woman, pale with perturbation, with a face fair but famine-stricken, her eye unwaveringly set, and having a half-delirious air about her, as she struggles forward in the throng. Dodging here and there—now to the right, and now to the left—seeing, hearing, and knowing nothing of all that is transpiring around her—she impetuously rushes onward. Whither is she bound? With what terrible tidings is her bosom laden? Where is she about to empty her heart of its freightage of woe? Let us follow her and see.

Gaining the entrance to an obscure street near the railway terminus, she suddenly plunged into the gloom. Meeting here with fewer obstructions to her progress, her pace becomes accelerated. She traverses a tortuous succession of streets, courts, and alleys, striding heavily along the dry, frosted pavement, as if she trod in clogs, until at length she emerges into a small square, situated in the very heart of the weaving district. It is surrounded by lofty, dilapidated houses, that

look as if they had been consigned to irredeemable ruin, or as though they had fallen into Chancery. There is something awful in the solitude, silence, and obscurity reigning here, after having passed so abruptly from the confusion and intense glare of the thronged city. There are no gas-lights burning near. The moon, however, shines tranquilly upon one side of the square. On reaching the open doorway of a house having three storeys above the basement, the jaded and excited woman disappeared. One flight of stairs are climbed—then another—and now she stands, momentarily pausing and listening, before the door of a chamber.

'Jane—is it you?' inquired a feeble voice from within.

In an instant she was in the room; and, as though the last atom of strength that very moment died out of her, she sunk down heavily upon the floor.

Here we are on the threshold of a weaver's home, and in the presence of a weaver's family, just as it is passing beneath the desolating power of one of those crises of wretchedness that are unhappily of such frequent occurrence among this class of industrious operatives, and especially during the periodical stagnations to which their trade is subject. The room was cold, barren, and furlorn; its hearth desolate; no candle illuminated the cheerless scene; no lingering spark of fire threw out its genial warmth from the bars of the cinderless grate; every vestige of domestic convenience seemed to have been swept away by the bitter blast of poverty; and the shivering, hunger-bitten inmates were huddled together in semi-nakedness in various parts of the room. All the light they enjoyed was the gift of the 'sun's fair servant,' whose welcome beams streamed in at the longitudinal lights that ran almost across the sides of the building. Beneath the windows facing the moon stood two looms, both having unfinished work in them. On the opposite side of the chamber were dimly visible the ruins of a third loom, and beside it was a 'quill-winding' machine, somewhat resembling a spinning-wheel, by means of which the silk is wound on to the 'quills' for the shuttle. Crouching beneath the 'porry' of one of the looms on the eastern side of the room, and in the full brightness of the beautiful moonlight, was the husband of the woman we have seen—a dark, wild, unshorn, haggard-looking man, just recovering from a terrible attack of fever, but whose convalescence had been hindered by the mental anguish and physical privations he had endured. His manly limbs had fallen away to a mere bony shadow, for famine had almost finished the cruel work that disease began. Beside him, reposing on a wretched apology for a mattress, were three young children, with no other covering than their father's scanty clothes to shield them from the wintry air. On the side of the room that was under an eclipse, seated amidst the skeleton remains of the mutilated loom, was a grey-headed old man, the father of the woman and the grand-sire of the children of whom we have spoken, and, clinging supportingly to his pithless arm, was a fair, intelligent-looking girl of about sixteen years of age, whom he affectionately called his 'Minnie.'

'Minnie, my child,' said he, as the poor woman swooned upon the floor, 'your mother is ill; see if you cannot help her; something uncommon sad has happened, I fear.'

The girl, though attenuated and enfeebled by insufficiency of food, needed no second exhortation, but affectionately strove to restore her parent to consciousness and composure; in which she at length succeeded.

'Well, Jane,' exclaimed her husband, who had been regarding her with intense solicitude, 'we began to grow alarmed at your long absence; it is now above eight hours since you left home, and we have been anxiously counting the moments till your return. Have you seen the master?'

'I have,' she responded, faintly; 'and not only was he heartless enough to spurn my petition, but he scrupled not to add insult to cruelty.'

'Ah, that is nothing new, Jane; like worms, we must submit to be trampled on, and never lift our souls against the beel of tyranny that crushes us to beggary. What new outrage has he committed?'

'On making known my errand to the foreman,' answered Mrs Arle, 'he told me without any ceremony, that he could advance me no money—it was against the established rules of the house; if they did it for me, they would soon be besieged with similar applications from swarms of improvident creatures like myself. I should always take care to save something,' he said, tauntingly, 'to meet such emergencies; they couldn't break their regulations, because workmen fell sick, and children took it into their heads to die; such cases would occur sometimes, and I must contrive to struggle through my difficulties in the best way I could. Saying this, he angrily struck his clenched hand against the counter, and roughly bid me begone. My flesh—what little there is left—quivered on my bones at such heartless treatment; I felt my blood mounting to my brow and tingle to

my fingers' end; the evil spirit came upon me; and words of reproach, all hot and hasty were rising to my lips; but remembering that I stood there in the threefold capacity of a daughter, a wife, and a mother, I drove my indignant feeling back into my heart, and shut them in. As the lives of all that are dear to me depended on my success, I felt that it would ill become me to give up without a bold and resolute effort. With the picture of this wretched home swimming before my eyes; the pining of my babes for bread sounding in my ears; and with the knowledge that I could but be refused, I boldly asked to be permitted to see Mr R——, the master; at which 'impudent request,' as he called it, the foreman was more enraged than ever, and threatened to turn me out of the warehouse. However I stayed hours after that, determined if possible to see the master, and lay seige to his heart

'Ah, ah! I reckon it would be a tough job to make any impression there,' interposed the excited husband. 'But, Jane, go on with your story.'

'After waiting till past six, I suppose, like the unjust judge in the parable, which was running in my mind all the time, he was wearied by what he styled my 'obstinacy;' for I was then sent for into the master's room. To reach it, as you know, I had to mount a flight of stairs; in going up which, from the growing stillness of the place—for the business of the day was just over—the heavy shoes that father kindly lent me made a loud clatter on the boards. On entering the apartment, he haughtily exclaimed, 'Woman, take those clogs off instantly. Where are your manners? How dare you behave so disrespectfully, as to enter my presence with them on?' Howsoever, I meekly corrected the mistake, and besought his indulgence for a moment, while I stated the object of my visit. Breaking out into a violent passion, he then called me a liar, and—here her voice faltered and thickened—'coming menacingly towards me, suddenly stooped down and lifted my apparel, in order to ascertain the correctness of his charge.* On discovering his error, instead of apologising for his rudeness and indelicacy, he ordered me instantly to quit the premises, backing it with a threat of a lodgement in the station-house. So I have returned as empty as I went.' Having concluded the maddening details, she buried her face in her hands, whilst large drops of indignant sorrow trickled between her fingers.

'Unmanly wretch!' vociferated the exasperated husband, emitting fire from his kindled eyes, and brandishing his bare, lank arms about like a pair of drumsticks. 'It is well for him I was not there. Wouldn't I have made his lordliness lick the dust? Wouldn't I have been down upon him like a flash of lightning?'

And judging from his aspect at that moment, we verily believe he would have been as good as his word.

'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,' prayed a feeble voice, issuing from the midst of the ruined loom.

'Silence, old man!' thundered the husband, with the strength and fierceness of a maniac when the fit is on him; 'this is how you're always canting, and profaning holy scripture, in a foolish attempt to excuse those religion-cloaked villains. Do you dare to tell me, or tell God, which is much worse, that these Whitened Sepulchres don't know what they're doing when they oppress, and wrong, and rob the poor, and brutally insult a helpless woman, driven by stress of misery to their feet, to ask—not for mercy; that be far from them to grant—but for justice, for the paltry wages that she has honourably earned! You want me to believe this charitable fiction, do you? No, no; not while there are any grains of common sense left in this brain-box; tapping with his fingers' ends, as he spoke, his fine intellectual region. 'These are your Christian men, your saints, your church-officers, and Exeter Hall magnates, are they?' added he, with a tone of sarcasm that was designed to wither up their specious pretensions, and fling them like perished leaves to the wild winds of winter.

Whilst Mr Arle was thus declaiming, the moon entered a thick cloud, and the room grew suddenly and ominously dark.

'Oh, dear father!' cried the frightened Minnie, 'I pray you, strive to be calm; you will bring on the fever and delirium again. Remember you are very weak; and oh! if you were to make yourself ill again, and God saw fit to take you away from us now, what would become of us? Do try and tranquillise yourself, dear father. We know these men are very wicked and cruel to me, but, perhaps, after all, there is truth in what they once told you, that they are scourges in the hand of God to punish us for our sins, and the departures of our people from him. We must each learn in patients to possess our souls.'

Those gentle, soothing words, flowing from the heart of a beloved daughter—for there is love among the poor, and especially in sea-

* This is a well-authenticated fact.

sons of agony and sorrow—threw a spell over his rebellious passions—beneath the influence of which he relapsed into silence.

'Oh murder,' faintly sobbed one of the little ones, 'I am so hungry; I feel so very ill; I think I shall die like my little budder—can't lo dive me, and Hetty, and Willy, just a little bit o' bread.'

How the bruised heart of the mother winced and bled under this appeal, only those who have passed through similar experiences can conceive! It is one of those bitter prerogatives of poverty with which the well-to-do cannot intermeddle.

'Oh, father, father!' exclaimed the mother, in a tone expressive of sharp spirit-agony 'my faith is failing me; the last spark of hope is dying out; I feel my heart becoming as dark and dismal as that fireless grate. Surely the Almighty has forsaken us!'

'Say not so, Jane; remember those Divine sayings your mother used to be so fond of quoting, when the cloud was passing over her: 'Man's extremity is God's opportunity; and another, which is like unto it, 'It is always darkest before dawn.'

'But where is help to come from? It is now four-and-twenty hours since food has passed any of our lips; and where the next morsel is to be obtained, He who feedeth the young ravens when they cry only knows. We have nothing left to pawn; every utensil from the room, and every rag that can with decency be spared, has been parted with, even the very clothing from the backs of the naked children have been converted into bread. There is nothing left now but the bird and its cage to dispose of; let us part with it, father, while we can, and save it from the doom that awaits us.'

'I cannot consent to that, Jane; I'm willing to share my last crumb with the sweet creature; I owe to it more than I can ever repay. It has so often softened my spirit, lured me back to the path of hope and duty, and inspired me with such happy memories of God and nature, and love to human-kind, by its melodious warblings, that I couldn't keep from despising myself if I were to part with it on such mercenary terms. Besides the children love it too. No; think again, Jane.'

'Well,' said she, in hesitating uncertainty, 'there is the Bible.'

'Never!' exclaimed the old man with a marked emphasis. 'Pawn the word of God for bread, Jane! Never! When that goes, you may write up lehabod on the bare walls, for the glory will indeed have then departed. With a Bible and a God, even this vile den becomes to me a temple.'

A pause ensued; filled up by painful musings, and the pining sobs of the half-frozen, half-famished children, as they clung closer to their sire, in a vain attempt to gather warmth.

At this moment the moonlight again poured in at the windows, brighter than ever.

'Capital thought!' exclaimed Minnie, rising, with the eager and delighted air of one who has found a great treasure. 'I just recollect having a few weeks ago put some boxes of lucifers away on the top of the empty cupboard, so that they might be out of the children's reach; since which time I had quite forgotten them.' Reaching them down, she counted six. 'Well,' she continued, with a smile of mingled gladness and irony, 'if I can sell these they will bring us threepence; a penn'orth of bread, a penn'orth of taters, and a penn'orth of tripe; shan't we have a dainty Christmas feast, after all?'

'Don't count of your chickens—you know the rest, my bonnie girl,' said the old man, casting a damper upon her new-born enthusiasm. 'There's a terrible strife abroad for bread to night.'

'Put on my old bonnet, Minnie,' said Mrs. Arle, 'and take this handkerchief that I have on, and throw it over your shoulders; you will need it, for the wind is bitter and outside.'

A drowning man they say will catch at straws. And here we see a fasting family, that is slowly perishing for want, and yet struggling bravely with the billows of adversity, stretching out its hands to grasp the shadowy and paltry proceeds of a few lucifer boxes, in the vain hope of appeasing, for days to come, the ravenous hunger of seven mouths.

'Don't beg, Minnie!' was the parting injunction of the elder man, as she was proceeding to leave the room. 'For the child of a weaver, and the grandchild of a Christian, to beg on the public streets, is a thing not to be heard of. May the bread of beggary never pass my lips! Yet,' checking himself, 'what do I say? Are there not hundreds, whose honourable souls once loathed the mendicant's choking gains as intensely as I do now, but whom misfortune, want, and who have step by step degraded?'

Such are not the ordinary ethics of starvation; yet many men cherishing such principles, and bequeathing them as a sacred heritage, are to be found among the calumniated silk-weavers.

Opening the door, the timid girl went forth into the cold bright night, followed by the fervent prayers of those she left behind and