

* * The Story Page. * *

Only a Husk.

An American story.

Tom Darcy, yet a young man, had grown to be a very hard one. At heart he might have been all right, if his head and his will had been all right; but these things being wrong, the whole machine was going to the bad very fast, though there were times when the heart felt something of its own truthful yearnings. Tom had lost his place as foreman of the great machine shop, and what money he now earned came from odd jobs of tinkering which he was able to do here and there at private houses, for Tom was a genius as well as a mechanic, and when his head was steady enough he could mend a clock or clean a watch as well as he could set up and regulate a steam engine, and this latter he could do better than any other man ever employed by the Scott Falls Manufacturing Company.

One day Tom had a job to mend a broken mowing machine and reaper, for which he received five dollars, and on the following morning he set out for his old haunt—the village tavern. He knew that his wife sadly needed the money, and that his two little children were in absolute suffering for want of clothing, and that morning he held a debate with the better part of himself, but the better part had become weak and shaky, and the demon of appetite carried the day.

So away to the tavern Tom went, where, for two or three hours he felt the exhilarating effects of the alcoholic draught, and fancied himself happy, as he could sing and laugh; but, as usual, stupefaction followed, and the man died out. He drank while he could stand, and then lay down in a corner, where his companions left him.

It was late at night, almost midnight, when the landlord's wife came to the bar-room to see what kept her husband up, and she quickly saw Tom.

"Peter," said she, not in a pleasant mood, "why don't you send that miserable Tom Darcy home? He's been hanging around here long enough."

Tom's stupefaction was not sound sleep. The dead coma had left his brain; and the calling of his name stung his senses by keen attention. He had an insane love of rum, but did not love the landlord. In other years Peter Tindar and himself had loved and wooed the sweet maiden—Ellen Goss—and he had won her, leaving Peter to take up with the vinegary spinster who had brought him the tavern, and he knew that lately the tapster had gloated over the misery of the woman who had once discarded him.

"Why don't you send him home?" demanded Mrs. Tindar, with an impatient stamp of her foot.

"Hush, Betsy! He's got money. Let him be, and he'll be sure to spend it before he goes home. I'll have the kernal of that nut, and his wife may have the husk!"

With a sniff and a snap Betsy turned away, and shortly afterward Tom Darcy lifted himself up on his elbow.

"Ah, Tom, are you awake?"

"Yes."
"Then rouse up and have a warm glass."
Tom got upon his feet and steadied himself.
"No; I won't drink any more tonight."
"It won't hurt you, Tom—just one glass."
"I know it won't!" said Tom, buttoning up his coat by the solitary button left. "I know it won't."

And with this he went out into the chill air of midnight. When he got away from the shadow of the tavern, he stopped and looked up at the stars, and then he looked down upon the earth.
"Aye," he muttered, grinding his heel in the gravel, "Peter Tindar is taking the kernal and leaving poor Ellen the worthless husk—a husk more than worthless! and I am helping him to do it. I am robbing my wife of joy, robbing my dear children of honor and comfort, and robbing myself of love and life—just that Peter Tindar may have the kernal and Ellen the husk. We'll see."

It was a revelation to the man. The tavern-keeper's speech, meant not for his ears, had come to his senses as fell the voice of the Risen One upon Saul of Tarsus.

"We'll see!" he said, setting his foot firmly upon the ground; and then he wended his way homeward.

On the following morning he said to his wife:

"Ellen, have you any coffee in the house?"
"Yes, Tom," she did not tell him that her sister had given it to her. She was glad to hear him ask for coffee, instead of the old, old cider.

"I wish you would make me a cup, good and strong."

There was really music in Tom's voice, and the wife set about her work with a strange flutter at her heart.

Tom drank two cups of the fragrant coffee, and then went out—went out with a resolute step, and walked straight to the manufactory, where he found Mr. Scott in his office.

"Mr. Scott, I want to learn my trade over again."

"Eh, Tom! what do you mean?"

"I mean that its Tom Darcy come back to the old place asking forgiveness for the past, and hoping to do better in the future."

"Tom," cried the manufacturer, starting forward and grasping his hand, "are you in earnest? Is it really the old Tom?"

"It's what's left of him, sir, and we'll have him whole and strong very soon, if you'll only set him at work."

"Work! Ay, Tom, and bless you, too. There is an engine to be set up and tested today. Come with me."

Tom's hands were weak and unsteady, but his brain was clear, and under his skillful supervision the engine was set up and tested; but it was not perfect. There were mistakes which he had to correct, and it was late in the evening when the work was complete.

"How is it now, Tom?" asked Mr. Scott, as he came into the testing-house and found the workmen ready to depart.

"She's all right, sir. You may give your warrant without fear."

"God bless you, Tom! You don't know how like sweet music the old voice sounds. Will you take your place again?"

"Wait till Monday morning, sir. If you will offer it to me then, I will take it."

At a little cottage Ellen Darcy's fluttering heart was sinking. That morning, after Tom had gone, she found a dollar bill in the coffee cup. She knew that he had left it for her. She had been out and bought tea and sugar, and flour and butter, and a bit of tender steak; and all day long a ray of light had been dancing and shimmering before her—a ray of the blessed light of other days. With prayer and hope she had set out the tea-table, and waited; but the sun went down and no Tom came. Eight o'clock—and almost nine.

Hark! The old step! quick, strong, eager for home. Yes, it was Tom, the old grime upon his hands, and the odor of oil upon his garments.

"I have kept you waiting, Nellie."

"Tom!"

"I didn't mean to, but the work hung on."

"Tom! Tom! You have been to the old shop."

"Yes, and I'm bound to have the old place, and—"

"O Tom!"

And she threw her arms around his neck, and covered his face with kisses.

"Nellie, darling, wait a little, and you shall have the old Tom back again."

"Oh, Tom! I've got him now, bless him! bless him! my own Tom! my husband! my darling!"

And then Tom Darcy realized the full power and blessing of a woman's love.

It was a banquet of the gods, was that supper—of the household gods all restored—with the bright angels of peace and love and joy spreading their wings over the board.

On the following Monday morning Tom Darcy assumed his place at the head of the great machine shop, and those who thoroughly knew him had no fear of his going back into the slounge or joylessness.

A few days later Tom met Peter Tindar on the street.

"Eh, Tom, old boy, what's up?"

"I am up, right side up."

"Yes, I see; but I hope you haven't forsaken us, Tom?"

"I have forsaken only the evil you have in your store, Peter; the fact is, I concluded that my wife and little ones had fed on husks long enough, and if there was a good kernal left in my heart, or in my manhood, they should have it."

"Ah, you heard what I said to my wife that night?"

"Yes, Peter; and I shall be grateful to you for it as long as I live. My remembrance of you will always be relieved by that tinge of warmth and brightness."—The West Shore.

The Sergeant's Solemn Vow.

BY CLARA D. KNAPP.

It was the evening after one of the greatest battles of the Rebellion. The surviving soldiers of the battle were fatigued, and glad to drop down almost anywhere to rest. Those who had been on the reserve were caring for the dead and wounded, and in the hospital tent those who wore the blue, and those who wore the gray, were groaning with the wounds received in battle, and were being treated by the Union physician.

Near the hospital, about a dozen Union men were sitting upon the ground, around a fire of sticks and limbs, trying to "cook coffee." They had been at the front all day; victory had been won. They were now upon the ground that had been occupied by the enemy in the morning. It was a victory; but such a victory, and at such a cost of human life! On the right and on the left, in front of them and in the rear, could be seen the dead bodies, dressed in the uniform of the friend and of the foe.

They were just taking the coffee from the fire when a soldier came up, and discovering that the dozen men were of his company said:

"How is it, boys; are you dry?"

"Trying to cook our coffee, Ned," said one of the soldiers, "but I guess it will be Virginia mud and water mixed together."

"I've got something good," said the first speaker, producing his canteen, which had hung across his shoulders.

"What is it?" asked one.

"Whiskey," replied Ned.

"You're a trump."

"That's jolly."

"That is just the stuff."

"That will revive us."

And other expressions of satisfaction and pleasure were made by the men.

"Here, sergeant," said Ned, reaching the canteen towards a tall, noble looking fellow who had been silent, "throw aside your temperance principles for once, and take a drink."

"Not any, Ned, thanks," replied the one addressed as sergeant.

"Come, now! you have fought like a tiger all day. You do not know but what you might have to rally in five minutes."

"True, Ned, but excuse me."

"Not a drop?"

"Not a drop?"

"Say, sergeant," said Ned, "if it is agreeable to the boys, we will adjourn the drink for five minutes, and you tell us how you came to be such an infernal advocate of temperance."

"I second the motion," said another soldier.

"And so do I!"

"And I, too!"

"Well, boys," said the sergeant, "I will tell you. It is a short story, and therefore soon told. When I was nineteen I had to leave school, owing to the death of my father. I came home to help my mother, who needed me. My father had been a prosperous farmer; he had that frugality and industry characteristic of the Vermont farmers. My mother I always considered the most handsome woman on earth, at least she appeared so to me; and as a mother there never was one better.

"After my father had been dead about a year, somehow I acquired a passion for hunting, fishing, and especially, cooning. There was nothing that delighted me so much as it did to take my dog and go out with some of the neighboring boys and bring home a number of coons. One night, three of our neighbors came to our house after me. They thought they had found a new place—a cornfield—where there was plenty of game. I needed no urging. I kissed my mother good-bye, told her that I would not be late, called my dog, and away we went.

"I drank some whiskey, and on my return reeled and staggered around the yard a little in a vain attempt to find the steps to the house. I stumbled over something, fell down, and was unable to get up. After a little I went to sleep—a regular drunken sleep.

"It seems that in the night sometime my mother became anxious because I did not come home. She had not been to bed, but had fallen into a slumber upon the couch. She awoke, as I said before, some time in the night, and fearing that harm had befallen me, arose from the couch, put her shawl over her head and started out to find me. And she found me in a condition most deplorable, indeed. I had been brutally treated by a highwayman. But when she stooped down to look at me, and saw by the moonlight, my face, she knew that her only child was drunk. She tried to waken me; she tried to get me into the house, but she had not the strength. She went to the house and got a pillow and placed it under my head. She covered me with blankets; she protected my face from the dew by placing an open umbrella over me. She drew her shawl tightly round her shoulders and sat down by my side. In the morning I awoke just as the sun was rising. I found her there. Great tears were chasing each other down her cheeks. I saw at once that my mother had cared for me all night. She had faithfully kept her lonely vigil watching her drunken son, weeping and praying.

"I am awfully thirsty," I said. My voice sounded strange, weak, and unnatural. I got up; my mother rose went to the well and brought me a cup of water. As she handed the cup to me she bowed her head that I might not see her grief; but I saw a tear come down her pale cheek and drop into that cup. I took the cup from her hand and drank its contents, tear and all. Yes, boys, drank my mother's tear, and I made a solemn vow that I never again would drink her tears.

"I led my mother into the house; I led her to the arm-chair, and as soon as she was seated I got down upon my knees.

"Mother," said I, "this is the first; it shall be the last."

"Charles," said she, running her fingers through my hair. I hope so. God bless you!"

"I looked up and my mother had fainted. I took her in my arms as one might take a child, and placed her