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"AT THE PUBLIC GOOD WE AIM."

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From Sketches of Every Day Life, by Box. THE WARDEN AND HIS CHILDREN.

A most thrilling narrative.—We will be bold to say, that there is scarcely a man in the constant habit of walking, day after day, through any of the crowded thoroughfares of London, who cannot recollect among the people whom he 'knows by sight,' to use a familiar phrase, some being of abject and wretched appearance, whom he remembers to have seen in a very different condition, whom he has observed sinking lower and lower by almost imperceptible degrees, and the shabbiness and utter destitution of whose appearance, at last, strike forcibly and painfully upon him as he passes by.

Is there any man who has mixed much with society, or whose avocations have caused him to mingle at one time or other, with a great number of people, who cannot call to mind the time when some shabby, miserable wretch, in rags and filth, who shudders past him now, in all the squalor of disease and poverty, was a respectable tradesman, or a clerk, or a man following some thriving pursuit with good prospects, and decent means; or cannot any of our readers call to mind from among the list of their quondam acquaintances, some fallen and degraded man, who lingers about the pavement in hungry misery—from whom every one turns coldly away, and preserves himself from sheer starvation, nobody knows how? Alas! such cases are of too frequent occurrence to be rare in any man's experience; and they arise from one cause—drunkenness; that fierce rage, for the slow, sure poison, that overtakes every other consideration; that casts aside wife, children, friends, happiness and station, and hurries its victims on, to degradation and death.

Some of these men have been impelled by misfortune and misery, to the vice that has degraded them. The ruin of the worldly expectations, the death of those they loved, the sorrow that slowly consumes, but will not break the heart, has driven them wild; and they present the hideous spectacle of madness, slowly dying by their own hands. But by far the greater part have wildly, and with open eyes, plunged into the gulf from which the man who once smelt it, never rises more, but into which he sinks deeper and deeper down, until recovery is hopeless.

Such a man as this, once stood by the bedside of his dying wife, while his children knelt around, and mingled low bursts of grief with their innocent prayers. The room was scantily and meanly furnished; and it needed but a glance at the pale form from which the life was fast passing a way, to know that grief, and want, and anxious care had been busy at the heart for many a weary year. An elderly female with her face bathed in tears, was supporting the head of the dying woman—her daughter—on her arm. But it was not towards her that the wan face was turned; it was not her hand that the cold and trembling fingers clasped; they pressed the husband's arm; the eyes so soon to be closed in death, rested on his face; and the man shook beneath their gaze. His dress was shabby and disordered; his face inflamed, his eyes blood-shot and heavy. He had been summoned from some wild debauch to the bed of sorrow and death.

A shaded lamp by the bedside, cast a dim light on the figures around, and left the remainder of the room in a thick, deep shadow. The silence of night prevailed without the house, and the stillness of death was in the chamber. A watch was hung over the mantle-shelf; its low ticking was the only sound that broke the profound quiet, but it was a solemn one;—it well they knew, who heard it, that before it had recorded the passing of another hour, it would beat the knell of a departed spirit.

It is a dreaded thing to wait and watch for the approach of death; to know that hope is gone, and recovery impossible; and to sit and count the dreary hours through long, long nights,—such nights as only waiters by the bed of sick-ones know. It chills the blood to hear the dearest secrets of the heart, the pent up, hidden recesses of many years, poured forth by the unconscious, helpless being before you; and to think how little the resolve and cunning of a whole life, will avail when fever and delirium tear off the mask at last. Strange tales have been told in the wanderings of dying men; tales so full of guilt and crime, that those who stood by the sick person's couch have fled in horror and affright, lest they should be seized to madness by what they heard and saw; and many a wretch has died alone, raving of deeds, the very name of which has driven the boldest man away.

But no such ravings were to be heard at

the bed-side by which the children knelt.— Their half stifled sobs and moanings alone broke the silence of the lonely chamber.— And when at last the mother's grasp relaxed; and turning one look from the children to their father, she vainly strove to speak, and fell backward on the pillow, all was so calm and tranquil, that she seemed to sink to sleep.—They leant over her;—they called upon her name, softly at first, and then in loud and piercing tones of desperation. But there was no reply. They listened for her breath, but no sound came. They felt for the palpitation of the heart, but no faint throb responded to the touch. That heart was broken, and she was dead. The husband sunk into a chair by the bed-side, and clasped his hands upon his burning forehead. He gazed from child to child, but when a weeping eye met his, he quailed beneath its look. No word of comfort was whispered in his ear, no look of kindness lighted on his face. All shrunk from and avoided him; and when at last he staggered from the room, no one sought to follow, or console the widower.

The time had been when many a friend would have crowded round him in his affliction, and many a hearty condolence would have met him in his grief. Where were they now? One by one, friends, relations, the closest acquaintances even, had fallen off from and deserted the drunkard. His wife alone had clung to him in good and evil, in sickness and poverty; and how had he rewarded her?—He had reeled from the tavern to her bed-side in time to see her die.

He rushed from the house, and walked swiftly through the streets. Remorse, fear, shame, all crowded on his mind. Stupefied with drink, and bewildered with the scene he had just witnessed, he re-entered the tavern he had quitted shortly before. Glass succeeded glass. His blood mounted, and his brain swarmed round. Death! Every one must die, and why not she? She was too good for me; her relations had often told him so. Curses on them! Had they not deserted her, and left her to whine away the time at home? Well, she was dead, and happy perhaps. It was better as it was. Another glass—some more! Hurrah! It was a merry life while it lasted; and he would make the most of it.

Time went on; the three children who were left to him grew up, and were children no longer—the father remained the same—poorer, sabbier, and more dissolute looking, but the same confirmed, and irremediable drunkard. The boys had long ago run wild to the streets, and left him the girl alone remained, but she worked hard, and words or blows could always procure him something for the tavern. So he went on in the old course, and a merry life he led.

One night, as early as ten o'clock—for the girl had been sick for many days, and there was, consequently, little to spend at the public house—he bent his steps homeward, bethinking himself that if he could have been able to earn money, it would be as well to apply to the parish surgeon, or, at all events, to take the trouble of inquiring what ailed her; which he had not yet thought it worth while to do. It was a wet December night, the wind blew piercing cold, and the rain poured heavily down. He begged a few half pence from a passer-by, and having bought a small loaf—or it was his interest to keep the girl alive, if he could, he shuffled onwards, as fast as the wind and rain would let him. At the back of Fleet street, and lying between it and the water side, are several mean and narrow courts, which form a portion of Whitechapel, and it was in one of these that he directed his steps.

The alley into which he turned, might, for filth and misery have compared with the darkest corner of his squalid sanctuary to its dirtiest and most lawless one. The houses, varying from two stories in height to four, were stained with every indescribable hue that long exposure to the weather, damp and rotteness can impart to incrustations composed originally of the redness and coarsest materials. The windows were patched with paper, and stuffed with the foulest rags; the doors were falling from their hinges; pots with lines on each to dry clothes projected from every casement, and sounds of quarreling and drunkenness issued from every room.

The solitary oil lamp in the center of the court had been blown out, either by the violence of the wind, or the act of some inhabitant who had excellent reasons for objecting to his residence being rendered too conspicuous; and the only light which fell upon the broken and uneven pavement, was derived from the miserable candles that here and there twinkled in the rooms of such of the more fortunate residents as could afford to indulge in so expensive a luxury. A gutter ran down the centre of the alley—all the stagnant odors of which had been called forth by the rain; and as the wind whistled through the old houses, the doors and shutters creaked upon their hinges and the windows shook in their frames with violence, which every moment seemed to threaten the destruction of the whole place.

The man whom we have followed into this den, walked on in the darkness, sometimes stumbling into the main gutter, and at others into some branch repositories of garbage, which had been formed by rain,

until he reached the last house in the court. The door, or rather wicket was left open, stood ajar, for the convenience of the numerous lodgers, and he proceeded to group his way upon the old and broken stair, to the attic story.

He was within a step or two of his room door, when it opened, and a girl, whose miserable and emaciated appearance was only to be equalled by that of the candle which she shaded with her hand, peeped anxiously out.

'Is that you father?' said the girl. 'Who else should it be?' replied the man gruffly. 'What are you crawling at? Its little enough that I've had to drink to-day, for there's no drink without money, and no money without work. What the d—'s the matter with the girl?'

'I am not well, father—not at all well,' said the girl, hesitating and tears.

'Ah!' replied the man, in the tone of a person who is compelled to admit a very unpleasant fact, to which he would rather remain blind if he could. 'You must get better somehow, for we must have money. You must go to the parish doctor, and make him give you some medicine. They're paid for it, d—'em. What are you standing before the door for?—Let me come in, can't you?'

'Father,' whispered the girl, shutting the door behind her, and placing herself before it. 'William has come back.'

'What?' said the man, with a start.

'Hush!' replied the girl; 'William, brother or William?'

'And what does he want?' said the man, with an effort at composure—'money?—money?—He's come to the wrong shop for that, if he does. Give me the candle—give me the candle—let me go to bed. He's not here, he's not here, he's not here.'

She snatched the candle from her hand, and walked into the room. Sitting on an old box, with his head resting on his hand, and his eyes fixed on a wretched under fire that was sizzling on the hearth, was a young man of about two and twenty, miserably clad in an old coarse jacket and trousers. He started up when his father entered.

'Father, the door, Mary,' said the young man hastily—'listen to the door. You look as if you didn't know me, father. It's long enough since you drove me from home; you may well forget me.'

'And what do you want here now?' said the father, seating himself on the other side of the fire-place. 'What do you want here now?'

'Father,' replied the son; 'I'm in trouble, that's enough. If I'm caught I shall swing that's certain. Caught I shall be, unless I stop here, that's as certain. And there's an end of it.'

'You mean to say you've been robbing or murdering then?' said the father.

'Yes, I do, replied the son, does it surprise you, father? He looked steadily in the man's face, but he withdrew his eyes, and bent them on the ground.

'Where's your mother?' he said, after a long pause.

'Where she'll never trouble you,' replied the son; 'John's gone to America, and Henry's dead.'

'Dead?' said the father with a shudder, who to even he could not repress.

'Dead,' replied the young man. 'He died to my arms—shot like a dog by a gamekeeper. He staggered back, I caught him, and his blood trickled down my hands. It poured on from his side like water. He was weak, and it did him but he threw himself down on his knees, on the grass, and prayed a God, that if his mother was in Heaven, He would hear her prayers for pardon for her youngest son. She was her favorite boy, Will,' he said, and I am glad to think now, that when she was dying, that I was a very young child then, and my little heart was almost bursting, I knelt down at the foot of the bed, and thanked God for having made me so fond of her as to have never once done any thing to bring the tears into her eyes; oh Will, why was she taken away and father left?'

'There's his dying words, father,' said the young man; 'make the best you can of 'em. You struck him across the face in a drunken fit the morning we ran away, and here's the end of it.'

The girl wept aloud; and the father sinking his head upon his knees, rocked himself to and fro.

'If I am taken,' said the young man, 'I shall be carried back into the country, and hung for that man's murder. They cannot trace me here without your assistance, father. For aught I know, you may give me up to justice, but unless you do, here I stop until I can venture to escape abroad.'

For two whole days, all three remained in the wretched room, without stirring out. On the third evening, however, the girl was worse than she had been yet, and the few scraps of food they had, were gone. It was indispensably necessary that somebody should go out; and as the girl was too weak and ill, the father went just at midnight.

He got some medicine for the girl, and a trial in the way of pecuniary assistance. On his way back, he earned sixpence by holding a horse; and he then dined homewards with enough money to supply their pressing wants for two or three days to come. He had to pass the public house. He lingered for an instant, walked past it, and turned back again, lingered once more, and finally

slunk in. Two men whom he had not observed, were on the watch. They were on the point of giving up their search in despair, when his loitering attracted their attention; and when he entered the public house, they followed him.

'You'll drink with me, master, said one of them, proffering him a glass of liquor.

'And me too,' said the other, replenishing the glass as soon as it was drained of its contents.

The man thought of his hungry children, and his son's danger. But they were nothing to the drunkard. He did drink and his reason left him.

'A wet night, Warden,' whispered one of the men in his ear, as he at length turned to go away, after spending in liquor one half of the money on which, perhaps, his daughter's life depended.

'The right sort of night for our friend in hiding, Master Warden, whispered the other.

'Sit down here,' said the one who had spoken first, drawing him into a corner. 'We came to tell him it's all right now, but we couldn't find him 'cause we hadn't got the precise direction. But that ain't strange, for I don't think he knew it himself, when he came to London, did he?'

'No, he didn't,' replied the father.

The two men exchanged glances.

There's a vessel down at the docks, to sail at midnight, when it's high water, resumed the first speaker, 'and we'll put him on board. His passage is taken in another name, and what's better than that, it's paid for. It's lucky we met you.'

'Very,' said the second.

'Capital luck,' said the first, with a wink to his companion.

'Great,' replied the second, with a slight nod of intelligence.

'Another glass here, quick,' said the first speaker. 'And in five minutes more the father had unconsciously yielded up his own son into the hangman's hands.'

Slowly and heavily the time dragged along, as the brother and sister, in the miserable lodging place, listened in anxious suspense to the slightest sound. At length a heavy footstep was heard upon the stair; it approached nearer; it reached the landing; and the father staggered into the room.

The girl said that he was intoxicated, and advanced with the candle in her hand to meet him; she stopped short, gave a loud scream, and fell senseless on the ground. She had caught sight of the shadow of a man, reflected on the floor. They both rushed in, and in another instant the young man was a prisoner and handcuffed.

'Very quietly it was,' said one of the men to his companion, 'thanks to the old man, lift up the girl, Tom; come, come, it's no use crying, young woman. It's all over now, and can't be helped.'

The young man stooped for an instant over the girl, and then turned fiercely round upon his father, who had reeled against the wall, and was gazing upon the group with drunken sympathy.

'Listen now, father,' he said in a tone that made the drunkard's flesh creep. 'My brother's blood and mine is on your head; I never had a kind look, or word, or care, from you, and alive or dead, I never will forgive you. Die when you will, or live, I will be with you. I speak as a man now, and I warn you, father, that as surely as you must one day stand before your Maker, so surely shall your children be there, hand in hand, to cry for judgment against you.' He raised his mangled hands in a threatening attitude, fixed his eyes on his shrinking father and slowly left the room; and neither father nor sister ever beheld him more on this side of the grave.

When the dim and misty light of a winter's morning penetrated into the narrow court, and struggled through the begrimed window of the wretched room, Warden awoke from his heavy sleep, and found himself alone. He rose, and looked round him; the old bed mattress on the floor was undisturbed; every thing was just as he remembered to have seen it last; and there were no signs of any one, save himself, having occupied the room during the night. He inquired of the other lodgers and of the neighbors, but his daughter had not been seen or heard of. He rambled through the streets, and scrutinized each wretched face among the crowds that thronged them, with anxious eyes. But his search was fruitless, and he returned to his garret, when night came on, desolate and weary.

For many days he occupied himself in the same manner, but no traces of his daughter did he meet with, and no word of her reached his ears. At length he gave up the pursuit as hopeless. He had long thought of the probability of her leaving him, and endeavoring to gain her bread in quiet elsewhere. She had left him at last to starve alone. He ground his teeth and cursed her.

He begged his bread from door to door. Every half-penny he could wring from the pity or credulity of those to whom he addressed himself, was spent in the old way. A year passed over his head; the roof of a jail was the only one that had sheltered him for many months. He slept under archways, and in brick-fields—any where, where there was some warmth or shelter from the cold and rain. But in the last stage of poverty, disease, and houseless want, he was a drunkard still.

At last, one bitter night, he sunk down on a door-step in Finsbury, faint and ill. The premature decay of vice and profligacy, had worn him to the bone. His cheeks were hollow and livid; his eyes were sunken, and their sight was dim. His legs trembled beneath his weight, and a cold shiver ran through every limb.

And now, the long-forgotten scenes of a misspent life crowded thick and fast upon him. He thought of the time when he had had a home; a happy, cheerful home; and of those who peopled it, and flung about him then, until the firms of his elder children seemed to rise from the grave, and stand about him—so plain, so clear and so distinct they were, that he could touch and feel them. Looks that he had long forgotten, were fixed upon him once more; voices long since hushed to death sounded in his ears like music of village bells. But it was only for an instant. The rain beat heavily upon him; and cold and hunger were gnawing at his heart again.

He rose, and dragged his feeble limbs a few paces farther. The streets were silent and empty; the few passengers who passed by, at that late hour, hurried quickly on, and his tremulous voice was lost in the violence of the storm. Again that heavy chill struck through his frame; and his blood seemed to stagnate beneath it. He curled himself up in a projecting doorway and tried to sleep.

But sleep had fled from his dull and glazed eyes. His mind wandered strangely, but he was awake, and conscious. The well-known shout of drunken mirth sounded in his ear, the glass was at his lips, the board was covered with choice, rich food—they were before him, he could see them all, he had but to reach out his hand and take them—and, though the illusion was reality itself, he knew that he was sitting alone in the deserted street, watching the rain-drops as they pattered on the stones; that death was coming upon him by inches; and that there were none to care for or help him.

Suddenly he started up, in the extremity of terror. He had heard his own voice shouting in the night air, he knew not what, or why. Hark! A groan! Another! His senses were leaving him; his limbs were and incoherent words burst from his lips, and his hands sought to tear and lacerate his flesh. He was young mad, and he shrieked for help till his voice failed him.

He raised his head and looked up the long dismal street. He recollecting that outcasts like himself, did not mind to wander day and night in those dead streets, had sometimes gone distracted with their own loneliness. He endeavored to have been, many years before, that a wretch had once been found in a solitary corner sharpening a rusty knife to plunge into his own heart, preferring death to that endless, weary wandering to and fro. In an instant his resolve was taken; his limbs received new life; he ran quickly from the spot, and passed not for breath until he reached the river.

He crept softly down the steep stone stairs that led from the commencement of the Waterloo Bridge down to the water's level.

He crouched in a corner and held his breath as the patrol passed. Never did a prisoner's heart throb with the hope of liberty and life half so eagerly as did that of the wretched man at the prospect of death. The watch passed close to him, but he remained unobserved; and after waiting till the sound of foot steps had died away in the distance, he cautiously descended, and stood beneath the gloomy arch that forms the landing place from the river.

The tide was in, and the water flowed at his feet. The rain had ceased, the wind was lulled and was for the moment still and quiet—so quiet that the slightest sound on the opposite bank, even the rippling of the water against the barges that were moored there, was distinctly audible to the ear. The stream stole languidly and sluggishly on. Strange and fantastic torus rose to the surface, and beckoned him to approach; dark gleaming eyes peered from the water, and seemed to mock his hesitation, while hollow murmurs from behind urged him onwards. He retreated a few paces, took a short run, a desperate leap, and plunged into the river.

Not five seconds had passed when he rose to the water's surface, but what a change had taken place in that short time in all his thoughts and feelings! Life, life, in any form, poverty, misery, starvation, anything but death. He fought and struggled with the water that closed over his head, and screamed in agonies of terror. The curse of his own son rang in his ears. The shore, but one foot of dry ground—he could almost touch the step. One hand's breadth nearer, and he was saved—but the tide bore him onward, under the dark arches of the bridge, and he sank to the bottom.

Again he rose, and struggled for life. For one instant—for one brief instant—the buildings on the river's banks, the lights on the bridge through which the current had borne him; the black water and the fast flying clouds were distinctly visible—once more he sank, and once again he rose. Bright flames of fire shot up from earth to heaven, and reeled before his eyes, while the water thundered in his ears, and strained him with its furious roar.