

Prayer-Book and Ledger

By M.S.P.

A STORY FOUNDED ON FACT.

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CHAPTER VI.

It was a careworn face which greeted Mrs Broome as she entered her little drawing-room an hour later, very unlike the Richard Joyce of our former acquaintance. Deep lines had furrowed themselves in his brow, and his mouth had the perpetually disappointed expression of a man hungry—but not for bread.

"I trust," he commenced in some embarrassment when, introductory greetings having taken place, Mrs Broome looked at him enquiringly, "that you will excuse the liberty I have taken in calling upon you. I am greatly distressed with regard to a friend, and knowing of your good work in the Temperance cause, thought perhaps you might be able to help me."

Mrs Broome's kindly interest was excited at once, and, having expressed her desire to assist him in any way, she begged him to proceed. "My friend is a married lady, young, attractive, with a good home and two fine little boys, who has unfortunately acquired the habit of taking too much wine."

"How did this commence, and how long has it been going on?"

"It commenced before the birth of her first child, when her father—a medical man—prescribed stimulant for her. She was advised to continue it while nursing the child, to keep up her strength, and so the habit has gradually been forming for the last four or five years."

"And does this lady now become really intoxicated?"

Richard winced at the word.

"I fear so," he replied.

Mrs Broome sat up and looked straight into his eyes. "Now, Mr Joyce," she said firmly, "if I am to help you, you must be perfectly candid with me. Is this lady your wife?"

Richard looked confused for the moment, and then recognising that this woman was worthy of full confidence, rejoined, "She is; my beloved and honoured wife."

Tears sprang unbidden to the eyes of his questioner, and this mark of sympathy unlocked the flood-gates of Richard's sorrow. Into no human ear had he been able to pour his grief, and to none had any hint been given of the heavy and increasing load which he bore. Now he found relief in telling of the horror which had taken possession of his soul when his suspicions were first aroused; of the revulsion of feeling when he loathed

and hated himself for having harboured the thought for a moment; how he had wilfully closed his eyes, until it once more forced itself upon him, with a strength of conviction which could not be resisted. He had consulted the family doctor, who had advised change of air and the breaking off of old associations. Pleadings and entreaties had been all in vain, promises of amendment being made only to be broken, and Gertrude—who had really meant to reform—fell again and again, resorting to all kinds of subterfuges and deceit to obtain means to indulge the craving which held her in its fatal chains. At last, fearful of disgrace to the church, he had retired from holy orders. A partnership in a firm of successful merchants having been offered him he accepted it, and was doing well. But his life was wretched, all his hopes for the future blasted, and the pain of the terrible cancer which was eating its way into the heart of his domestic life became every day more unbearable.

"How does Mrs Joyce procure the stimulant?" Mrs Broome enquired.

"I do not know.—I always carry the keys of the wine-cupboard and cellar, and I cannot imagine where she gets it. I think the grocer must supply it, entering it as groceries. O my poor boys, what will become of them!" and the strong man groaned in his agony.

Mrs Broome sympathised, soothed and cheered, and finally succeeded in imparting to Richard a hope considerably brighter than the one which animated her own breast. She had seen too many of these cases to be very hopeful of them in a country where facilities abound on every hand for obtaining the poisonous cup.

(To be continued.)

The "South Australian Advertiser," in its leader, speaks thus of the W.C.T.U. Convention recently held in Adelaide:—"Women are hardly likely to seek entrance to the Legislature, for already they have a Parliament of their own. It is true that the power to make laws is not possessed by that assembly. But it is evidently felt that there is ability to influence the course of public affairs. The session of the W.C.T.U., which is being held this week, though relatively brief, is crowned with incident, while for variety of topic it can give points to any political programme ever formulated. The orderly method of conducting the proceedings, the despatch of business, the average ability shown by the speakers, the debating power developed in the discussions, the control exercised by the lady president, the discipline observed by the members, and the earnestness of all concerned, are features which impress all visitors to the meetings."

"Ah! what's this?" exclaimed the intelligent compositor. "'Sermons in stones, books in the running brooks?' That can't be right. I have it! 'Sermons in books, stones in the running brooks.' That's sense." And that is how the writer found it. And yet he was not happy.