

### TOM RYDER'S CHILD.

Mr. Marsh, when he was sitting in the village store with the heels of his well-tanned boots carefully poised on the edge of the corrugated cylinder stove, was a far larger man than when he was at home. Perhaps it was for that reason that he spent so much time in the store. A man likes to feel large and to hawk and expectorate in an independent manner.

When under the protection of his own roof this gentleman was very much in the shadow of his wife. He never hawked and he never expectorated there. He shrank up into the smallest possible compass and seemed to deprecate the fact that he was alive at all. If he could have come in and gone out at the key-hole he would have felt an unutterable relief.

As it was, he was in constant fear lest he should forget to wipe his feet, or lest he should leave a door unlatched. He often told himself "he'd rather be darned any day than to forget to wipe his feet twice." First on the hunk mat in the sink room and next on the braided mat at the kitchen door. When Mr. Marsh said "he'd rather be darned," he meant that he preferred being consigned to hades. He often thought it would be a kind of relief to be in that place "and done with it." But he always was very ineck indeed when he had indulged in such thoughts.

Mrs. Marsh was a large, dark, mottled woman, who was believed by some to be a good nurse. She certainly had the merit of subduing her charges into absolute quiescence. She boasted that folks that "she took care on knew their places mighty quick; 'n' their places was to jest-lay still 'n' let the Lord do as he pleased."

She was fond of mentioning the Lord at the most unexpected and irritating times. She had referred to him on so many occasions in regard to her husband's bringing in "medder mud" and other kinds of soil on the soles of his boots that Mr. Marsh was continually harassed by a fear lest he might become prejudiced and acquire a habit of thinking disrespectfully of the Lord. If he did acquire such a habit, he hoped fervently and in plain terms that it might be laid to D'rindy's charge rather than to his. Dorinda was his wife's name; and it was the name given to each of five consecutive daughters who had been born to Mr. and Mrs. Marsh and who had all died when children.

There were residents in the village who always took friends who came from a distance to the graveyard to see the "row of D'rindies," as this series of mounds was usually termed.

These continual bereavements were very hard to bear during their occurrence, but after some years had passed and the wounds were scarred Mrs. Marsh was conscious of a certain distinction coming from the fact that she was, in a certain sense, owner of that row in the cemetery. She had a pride in keeping the small graves and their headstones in the very best condition; or rather she made Mr. Marsh keep them so.

When I have seen that woman striding toward the hill slope where the graveyard was, I have wondered if she did not feel a satisfaction that there were five mounds instead of four; five made a much more impressive row. If one of those babies had grown it would doubtless have brought in a great deal of mud in the spring, snow in the winter, and road dust in the summer. It would have "littered things up jest awful," to use a favorite expression of Mrs. Marsh. Was it possible that there were compensations? It is a distinction, too, to have had a "dretful sight of sickness in your family;" to have "notes put up" for the sufferer and the sufferer's friends.

Do you know what it means to have a note put up? It is to arrange that the minister shall find, apparently in the hymn book, a scrap of paper asking the prayers of the congregation for a family in affliction. The name of the person is often given, and then there is a rustling and a turning and a looking at the nearest relative who happens to be present. When things by land and by sea have been prayed for, when people "scattered up and down this sinful earth" have been mentioned, then the minister changes his tone to one of more feeling, and petitions that this dear sinner whose child is on a bed of sickness may be strengthened to endure, and that, if it be so decided that she be called upon to give up that beloved one, she may be enabled to bow her head to his great and glorious will, and to bless him, even though he slay.

There is a great sameness about the words used in response to this asking for prayers, but who shall say that those phrases do not sometimes touch healingly a sore heart?

Reuben Marsh never missed going to meeting a single Sunday during all the times when his children were pining and dying.

Sometimes he would far rather have stopped at home, being possessed by that piteous and natural feeling that he, with all his strength and vigor, might in some way give of that strength to the poor little thing moaning on the bed. But his wife had made him go. She had even found time as usual to fasten his collar and button on the rusty black necktie.

And he had always heard those prayers in answer to the note he had put up. He held himself rigidly upright. His heavy, bearded face was impassive to look upon. People who looked at him curiously saw nothing but the calm, rough face. His hands were thrust into the big pockets of his loose sackcoat; the great, knucky fingers writhed and twisted as the prayer proceeded.

Mr. Marsh heard the words going on and on over his head. He felt as if he were groping in horrible darkness. All the time he was saying to himself: "O God, let her live! O God, let her live! I can't live if you take this one, too!"

He thought he could not live. But that one, too, was taken, and still the sun continued to rise and set on Reuben Marsh, and still Mrs. Marsh hectored

him from morning to night, and occasionally reminded him of what a mother suffered in the loss of a child. She said she s'posed a father had some feelings, but how could a father know a mother's heart?

Evidently there was no answer to this question. Certainly Mr. Marsh attempted to give none.

Mrs. Marsh talked a great deal to her husband and to the neighbors generally about the fact that all her children had been born without any constitutions. She didn't know why it was, for all her folks were made of iron. She often inquired how it was that a child with no constitution at all could be expected to live. She told Reuben it was too much to ask. She gave every one to understand that Reuben seemed to believe their children ought to live; but she knew they couldn't.

As the years went by she made Mr. Marsh keep those little graves, and their headstones, and their lettering of "Dorinda, daughter of Reuben and Dorinda Marsh," more and more "trigged up." When Mr. Marsh was not at home nor at the store it was well known that he must be "to the cemetery triggin' up them graves."

It was one mild day in winter that Mr. Marsh put on his overcoat and his rubber boots. He said he was going down to the store and guessed he should just stop in at the graveyard before he came home. The hill sloped to the south there, and it was warm and sunny, almost like a spring day.

The man had it in his mind that there was just a chance that some snowdrops might be blossomed, or at least budded. But if he should find a bloom he was not so crazy, he told himself, as to take it to his wife, who would only consider it as some kind of "litter." He should stop at the store, as he said, and he should probably see Tom Ryder's forlorn little girl shivering about, and he should give the flower to her. Then her small, pinched face would suddenly lighten, and she would smile in that radiant way that always went like a knife to Reuben Marsh's heart. He wondered if any of those Dorindies, if any had lived, would have had such a face and such a smile as that. If they "took after" their mother they surely would not.

Once after Mr. Marsh had seen this transformation take place in the face of Tom Ryder's daughter when she had received a kindness he had ventured to speak about her to his wife, with a wild hope in the bottom of his heart that they might adopt Ryder's child, for Ryder was only a drunken wretch whose wife had long since died of a broken heart and too much work.

Mrs. Marsh made it very plain indeed to her husband that she had no opinion whatever of that nasty Belle Ryder.

Mr. Marsh had fallen into his ordinary home mood of dull, cowed silence. He sat with his slippered feet on their wooden cricket, and hung his head, pulling his beard slowly and wondering what he was living for.

He supposed men never hated their wives. He supposed there was no man in the world whose wife was such a good cook, who kept her husband's clothes so well mended and so clean as D'rindy did, but he said plainly to himself that "he'd rather be flogged than to be where she was."

Often, as he sat there pulling his beard and watching D'rindy as she made everything painfully clean, he told himself that he must have been even more of a fool than most young men to have fallen in love with a girl who could turn out to be such a woman as that. He also asked of his own soul how it would be with him if it were possible for a man to hate his wife.

When he walked slowly through the mud of the main street he was conscious that there was more than the ordinary bitterness in his heart. He stamped down his heavy feet with an air of bravado when he reached the store. He took in a large quantity of mud, and he talked so loud and spat so emphatically that the storekeeper winked at the man next to him, and said in a whisper that D'rindy must have been carryin' an uncommon high hand with Reuben that day.

But for all this extra swagger Mr. Marsh was aware that he was greatly depressed. It did not seem to exhilarate him to have his heels on the stove. He did not understand himself today, and he left the store much earlier than was his custom. One of the men actually got up from his broken backed chair and went to the window to watch the re-tracing figure.

"Something or other's the matter of Reub Marsh," he said pityingly. "I never seen him miss his aim a-spittin' before, 'n' he missed it every time today."

The storekeeper was chopping off a piece of tobacco. He nodded his head. He said he was sorry for Reub. He s'posed he was goin' up to them graves now. He hoped it wa'n't wicked, but he did think 't would be jest as well if there was a sixth grave in that row and D'rindy was laying in it. For his part he'd like to help trig up D'rindy Marsh's grave, whether 'twas wicked or not.

Then they fell to talking about Tom Ryder, and of the fact that he had been gone a week, nobody knew where, on a worse spree than ever.

"I guess they'll have to take the little one to the poorhouse this time, and no mistake. Somebody ought to speak to the selectmen, 'n' have her seen to."

Mr. Marsh walked on mechanically up the road. He did not know why it was that he could not throw off his wife's influence when he had left her, as he was usually able to do.

Some strangely desperate mood was upon him. He put his hand to his head, and said if he didn't know better he should almost think he had been drinking.

Just before he reached the cemetery he passed by the house where the Ryders lived, an old place with low eaves that looked as if they would always drip with unhealthy moisture. Some of the window panes were stuffed with rags, and a cat walked with ostentatious misery among the puddles near the front door.

Mr. Marsh wished he had brought

some baker's cookies from the store, but as he had nothing he went on staring vainly about in the hope of seeing Belle.

In a few minutes more he was standing by the row of graves and looking sharply down at the sodden turf for the snowdrops. There were the green leaves. He knelt and pushed aside the brown, wet grass. His heavy face took on a pathetic look of eagerness. No, it was too early; the sun had not been warm enough. There were no blossoms—not even buds.

"It's too bad—too bad!" he muttered. "How she would er liked 'em!"

He stood up. He brushed a mist from his eyes that made the headstones look as if they were not straight.

Something that felt cold and wet, like ice, touched the hand that hung down by his side. But he did not notice the touch until it was repeated, this time accompanied by a whine. Mr. Marsh aroused himself and patted the lean, unhappy looking cur that stood beside him.

"Hallo, Jack," he said, "where's your little mistress?"

Jack wagged his tail and made as if he would trot back home, but as Mr. Marsh did not follow him he returned and licked his hand again. He went through these movements so many times that the man at last walked after him, the dog continually looking behind, until he had led his friend to the back door of the Ryder house. This door stood open.

Mr. Marsh had not heard that Tom Ryder was "on a spree," and he expected every moment to be greeted by the owner of this place, whom he despised and whom he always wanted to kick every time he saw him.

Instead of a masculine voice, however, a piping, feeble treble sounded from one of the front rooms.

"Oh, Jack, don't you leave me too! Don't you go 'n' leave me too!"

Reuben Marsh stood suddenly still from sheer weakness. His great, tender heart seemed to choke him. He heard the dog whining joyfully and scuttling about the room he had entered. He breathed a long breath and pushed the door further open, apparently taking but one stride from the door to a "trundle bed" which was in a corner. On the bed was a child who stared wildly for an instant at this intruder, then a flush of joy overspread her face. She put out two bony arms to the man bending over her. She laughed.

"I've jest be'n prayin' for a friend," she cried feebly. "I kep' a-prayin' so hard that God had to hear finally."

Mr. Marsh gathered the child to his breast. His heart glowed. His eyes sparkled as he felt the frail form leaning confidently against him.

He took a frayed blanket from the bed and wrapped her up until she was like a mummy. He was smiling all the while he was doing this.

"Where's your father?"

"I d' know. He's been gone ever so many days, I guess."

"Ain't you hungry?"

"I was hungry after I let up all there was, some bread 'n' sausage. Then I got faint; then I was so awful kind of sick."

The child leaned her head on the man's shoulder and shut her eyes. He held her yet closer.

"I'll take ye right home," he said.

He stepped out into the mild, damp air. He held his head very high, and his eyes sparkled more than ever. He walked down and into the village street as if he had been a soldier coming from a victory. He nodded at the few acquaintances he saw, and who looked at him wondering, but he would not stop to speak to any one.

The storekeeper saw him, and said to a customer that there was Reub Marsh with Ryder's little girl, 'n' he guessed Reub'd ketch it when he got home.

Mr. Marsh still held his head up when he entered his own kitchen, tracking in a good deal of mud as he did so, for he did not pause at the huskmat, nor yet at the rug by the kitchen door.

"Bring me a cup of milk with a drop of hot water in it," he said, sitting down in the large rocker by the stove.

Jack had entered also, and he also had brought in mud. He sat calmly on his dirty haunches on the shiny oiledots by the chair which held Mr. Marsh and his mistress.

Mrs. Marsh stood a moment in bewilderment; then she brought the milk.

Her face softened somewhat as she looked at the pinched features on her husband's shoulder.

"She is starvin'," said Mr. Marsh, shortly.

"We'll give her a good meal, 'n' then you c'n take her right back," remarked Mrs. Marsh, with her usual decision. She added that Reuben could go right over to Mr. Wallis, who was one of the selectmen, and have the child taken to the poorhouse that very night.

In ten minutes the girl was sound asleep. Mr. Marsh laid her on the lounge and covered her with a shawl. He fed Jack, who ate very hastily and with the utmost greediness and then curled up on the floor by the couch.

Reuben Marsh rose from his bending position over the lounge. He looked his wife squarely in the face, a thing he had not done for years.

She gazed back at him with something like consternation slowly growing in her mind.

"I'm goin' to do one of two things, D'rindy," he said very slowly, "and it's for you to say which it'll be. I'm goin' to keep Tom Ryder's child if he don't take her away from me, 'n' I guess he won't. I'm goin' to keep her here if you're willin', if you ain't willin' I sh'll go where I can keep her. 'N' she's goin' to be treated well too. Now which shall it be, D'rindy?"

Mr. Marsh, with that delicious love for the child in his heart, looked very big and manly.

Mrs. Marsh mechanically brushed the stove hearth with a turkey wing before she replied.

"I rather think, Reuben," she said, "you might's well keep her here."—New York Tribune.

"Jimmieboy has swallowed one of my poems," said Reuben, in despair.

"That's all right," said the doctor.

"Mush is good for children."—Docket.

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