

THROUGH COLORED GLASSES

He stopped, and allowed his boot clad, feet to sink ankle deep in the thick oozy mud. From his lips there came a sound that was a half a sob and half a groan. He was tired, so tired, and hungry and wet. He lifted his head and looked about him. The rain was falling with a steady noiseless drizzle as it had been falling for days. It encompassed and submerged the landscape with a gray and murky covering of woe. The lonesome country road was a narrow streak of mud extending in a straight black line through the brown and barren fields. Far in the distance a single farm house broke the monotony of the perspective standing solitary and alone, lost in the wilderness of desolation. A lonesome little clump of trees lay between, their leafless, scrawny branches uplifted in mute supplication to the pitiless grim sky.

The thin and haggard face of the wanderer was blanched with a peculiar, deathlike pallor. His lips were drawn tightly in over and against his teeth; his eyes were wild and staring, and in their depths lurked the demon of despair and gleamed gloatingly out on the sky as the man turned his face up to its ceaseless drizzle.

He looked about him once, and again, --then staggered wearily on. The only sound disturbing the solitude was the splashing of his boots in the soft, black mud;--all but the low spoken words,-- words in a quavering, broken voice, "God bless you my son, my son,"--and they sounded only in his mind. God bless him! Had God any blessing for such as he? And the mind of the wanderer traveled back a pace, and he was a boy once more.

He saw his boyhood's love. Half within the shadow of their vine clad porch, the broken yellow sunbeams playing softly and tenderly as the smiles of angels about her head she was standing, the glad and holy light of a mother's love shining in her eyes, waiting to welcome him, as he came running home from the village school.

"Oh, mother, mother, mother, mother." He half started at the sound of his own voice, so strange it seemed, so harsh and rough;--a voice sadly out of place in that hallowed scene conjured up in the outcast's mind.

Then, once more he knelt with her by his lowly little cot, his hands clasped lovingly in hers resting on the pure white spread. Again he heard her praying, in her gentle, loving voice for God to make her Jamie a good and noble man,--and she knew He would. "Her Jamie, her dead son;" and she kissed him tenderly on the forehead and left him to dream of great things for him and for her in the days that were to come.

Oh, the mockery of it all! How the Fates must have laughed, he thought, and gibberingly pointed their lean and skinny fingers at the pure and faithful woman who prayed with the noble confidence of belief that God would make her Jamie good and strong.

Another scene! As it were yesterday, he sees himself standing in all the health and holiness of a pure young manhood,--standing bare headed and bare breasted, in the early morning light. The pistol in his hand is yet smoking, and there, at his feet, the surgeon and seconds bending over him, lies his friend,--his friend, dying, innocent. Oh, God; the horror of it all!

Then he stands before the bar of justice,--before the twelve good men and true. "Prisoner at the bar, are you?" "Guilty, your honor, guilty!"

His mind is dazed, his senses numbed. He seems still standing on the green meadow in the clear, cool air, as the

meadow lark sings his greeting to the rising sun, and hears again and again the cool, methodical.

"Gentlemen! Are you ready? One, two, three,--fire!"

He feels, yet does not heed, the tender pressure of the fingers of the woman at his side,--his wife, on his browned and sun-burnt hands. He hears a shriek, voicing all the bitter, hopeless agony of a mother's broken heart,--the mother who prayed for Jamie,--and sees those two, mother and wife, with bowed heads walk slowly and unsteadily away, while he, the hope, the staff, the comfort of their lives, is led to prison.

"Twenty years in solitary confinement,"--he, Jamie, had lived them. Twenty years of a living death, with scarcely the sight of a human face, hardly the sound of a human voice. Twenty years of shame, of remorse, of agony. Twenty years of himself. Himself, before whom rose always and ever the vision of his friend, his wronged and murdered friend, lying cold and still, outraging the fresh clear beauty of the morning; the vision of a loving, girlish figure standing trembling at his side as he swore to love and honor and protect her; the vision of his mother, kneeling by her boy's bedside praying. Oh, God! praying, for what?

And then, to the music of the Homeric laughter of the gods in Heaven he heard the words,--always the words, "Gentlemen! are you ready? One, two, three,--fire!"

How he had prayed, all those twenty years, prayed for life and freedom,--for a chance to atone. How he dreamed of the day when he should hasten back to them who waited and wept, to grovel at their feet for forgiveness, and then to atone by years of grief. Oh, the agony and hope, the repentance and high resolve of those twenty years; the days and nights and weeks and months of dreading, numbing pain. For twenty years a convict, with a man's longings and hopes and fears and aspirations.

Today, he was free, but his brain, his heart, was dead.

For a week ago,--and a day, sobs shook the convicts frame, he had sought them, these two, for forgiveness. A week ago he had knelt by the bedside of her was yet living, to receive her dying blessing.

"God bless you, my son, my son!" Still on and on the wandering trudged, and the shades of night fell softly as the rain and hid him in her mantling folds.

On high the fates, as they spun the warp and woof of human destiny laughed their mournful world-old laugh and shook their frowled heads and said: "God make Jamie a good and noble man."

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