Undressing Little Ned

'Where is 'Whisky Bill,' who used to drive that old white horse in front of a twenty-five cent express wagon ?' repeated the man, in tones of surprise.

'Yes.' 'Well, now it's a curious case,' he slowly continued. 'We all thought he'd gone to the dogs for sure, for he was drinking a pint of whisky a day, but a few months ago he braced right up, stopped drinking, and now I hear he's in good business, and saving money. It beats all, for the last time I saw him he seemed underground.'

When you go home at night and find that all is well with your own flesh and blood, do you go to sleep reasoning that the rest of the world must take care for itself? Do you ever shut your eyes and call upon the hundreds of faces you have met during the day, and wonder if the paleness of death will cover any of them before the morrow? When you have once been attracted to a face, even if it be a stranger's, do you let it drop from memory with your dreams, or do you call it up again as night comes down, and hope it may loose none of its brightness in the whirling mists of time?

'So, 'Whiskey Bill' was hunted down. An inquiry here and there finally traced him to a little brown cottage on a by-street. He sat on the step in the twilight, a burly, broad shouldered man of fifty, and in the house three or four children gathered around the lamp to look over a picture book.

'Yes, they used to call me 'Whisky Bill' down town,' he replied, as he moved along and made room; 'but it is weeks since I heard that name. No wonder they think me dead, for I've not set eyes on the old crowd for months, and I don't want to for months to come.

'They tell me you have quit drinking. One could see that by your face. 'I hope so. I haven't touched a drop since February. Before that I was half drunk, day and day out, and more of a brute than a man. I don't mind saying that my wife's death set me to thinking, but I didn't stop my liquor. God forgive me, but I was drunk when she died, half drunk at the grave, and I meant to go on a regular spree that night. I was low down, sir, but I was not better than a brute those days.'

'And so you left your motherless children at home and went out and got drunk ?'

'No, I said I meant to, but I didn't. The poor things were crying all day, and after coming home from the burial I thought to get 'em tucked away in bed before I went out. Drunk or sober, I never struck one of 'em a blow, and they never ran from me when I staggered home. There's four of 'em in there, and the youngest isn't quite four years yet. I got the older ones in bed all right, and then came little Ned. He had cried himself to sleep, and he called for mother as soon as I woke him. Until that night I had never had that boy on my knee, to say nothing of putting him to bed, and you can guess these big fingers made slow work with the hooks and buttons. Every minute he kept saying mother didn't do that way, and the big children were hiding their heads under the quilts to drown their sobs. When I had his clothes off and his night-gown on, I was ashamed and put him down, and when the oldest saw tears in my eyes and jumped out of bed to put her arms around my neck I dropped the name of 'Whisky Bill' right then and forever.'

'And little Ned.' 'Mebbe I'd have weakened but for him,' replied the man as he wiped his eyes. 'After I got the child's night gown on, what did he do but kneel right down beside me and wait for me to say the Lord's Prayer to him Why, sir, you might have knocked me down with a feather! There I was, mother and father to him, and I couldn't say four words of that prayer to save my life! He waited and waited for me to begin, as his mother always had, and the big children were waiting, and when I took him in my arms and kissed him, I called upon Heaven that my life should change from that hour. And so it did, sir, and I've been trying hard to lead a sober, honest life. God helping me,no one shall call me 'Whisky Bill' again.' The four children, little Ned in his night-gown, came out for a good night kiss, and the boy cuddled in his father's arms for a moment and said

'Good-night, pa-good-night everybody in the world-good-night, ma, up in Heaven-and don't put out the light 'till we get to sleep .- M. Quad.

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