



A Blot on St. Basil.

IN the parish of St. Basil-in-the-East there is like to be a vacancy for a male Bible-reader, for committees are aflare at the scandalous misuse of some part of Mr. Albert Murch's last week's pay. It was not extravagant pay for a week, being, in fact, a good way short of a sovereign. But it was explained to him at his appointment that the consciousness of doing good would support him — not to mention his old mother. And many people — the committees, for instance — worked zealously for no other reward whatever: as was notorious everywhere; and if it were not, truly it was by no neglect of the committees.

Nor is this the first complaint against Mr. Murch, though

certainly it is the most shocking. He was a promising young man in the beginning, becomingly docile and obedient, and with some enthusiasm for his work, as was shown by his renunciation of his situation and prospects, in order to devote himself thereunto. But as time went, and his clothes grew seedier, it became vaguely suspected that he had begun to hold secret opinions of his own in the matters of visits and relief of the poor: an ineffable presumption. For the committees, and the associations, and the rest, did they not know all about it? They gave their whole energies (for several hours a week) to the business, and their names were known far and wide as Authorities on the Lives of the Poor; while he, of whom nobody out of the parish had ever heard, was little more than one of the poor himself, groping about underground among them. Now and again he had an irritating trick of being right; and if he had been less insignificant, and if the committees and associations had not needed most of their jealousy and spite for use among themselves, he would have run into trouble sooner.

It seemed plain that constant contact with the lower orders had blunted all his finer feelings. He would recommend the most sullen and unrepentant for relief—people so wholly conscious of their lack of claim that they never asked for themselves; people altogether unconverted; while others, fervidly converted a dozen times over, and ever ready to be converted again, he reported “undeserving.” Fortunately there were those who could check his discreditable partialities; as in a flagrant case, but a little before his final lapse, when a member of a committee, minded to make personal visits in Randall’s Rents, found two very respectful and plainly deserving families wholly destitute of bedding, coals, and provisions—a state of affairs that Mr. Murch had never even reported. The deficiencies were supplied on the spot. And the Bible-reader’s explanations, when he was called to account, were far-fetched and ludicrous. He tried to convince the committee that the two families, the Jepps and the Blandys, having word of the nearing visitor, passed their portable property through their windows, which stood frame to frame in a wall-angle; first, all the Jepp bedclothes into the Blandys’ room, and then, as soon as the visitor was engaged on other floors, all the Blandy property, with the Jepps’ own, in the opposite direction, so that both rooms should seem equally necessitous. To

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offer such a story was a mere trifling with the committee, and Mr. Murch was told so, with asperity. It was also an insult to the intelligence of the exploring committee-member, and an evidence of an unworthy attitude of mind toward the suffering poor.

Mr. Murch, for his part, went his way hopelessly enough. He was not a strong man, either in body or in spirit; and such strength as he possessed grew from fervour of conviction and knowledge of his work. Still, he was ever at odds with himself, and the prey of doubts. *Was* he right, after all, in his treatment of the Hanks, and should he have said what he did to the Poysers or not? Such questions kept him awake at night. Again, should he have given the man Briggs those few coppers from his own pocket (for the committee would give nothing), when his mother was old and ailing, and really needed beef-tea? Which way lay his duty?

His offence, which surprised even the Randall's Renters, and for that was noised abroad, was committed on a dank, wet day, when the world bore a more than commonly hopeless aspect in his eyes. His umbrella had grown so bad of late, had gone at so many joints, that he left it at home. He buttoned his coat about him—though he was loth to put strain on the worn button-holes—turned down his hat-brim, and dodged the puddles as best he might.

Randall's Rents was to be the scene of his morning's work, and thither he took his way, through streets growing narrower and fouler as he went. Mrs. Bannam's was the case he had most in mind, and he doubted much if he should find her alive. A long course of drinking, and insufficient eating with it, had laid her low with a hopeless hobnailed liver, and now hyperstatic pneumonia had come in to cut the struggle shorter. As a hard drinker she was no rarity in Randall's Rents, but she had been also a hard worker, which was in no way so common. She had sworn at a lady visitor, who had pushed into her room without knocking or asking leave, and so was cut off from the aid of committees; and she had loudly proclaimed that she could work for her own blankets, coals, and groceries, and would neither beg, nor go to church, nor be converted, in order to get them free. She had been the chief support of a very large son of about thirty, who did not consider his constitution fitted to any exertion beyond that involved in leaning against the doorpost of the "Three Bells," and punching his mother



*"At the window the woman jammed her eye closer,
for the fray was drifting up the street."*

Drawn by L. Raven Hill.

when supplies ran short. So that now her destitute child had taken himself off, and neighbours tended her.

As Mr. Murch, already half wet through, turned the corner into Randall's Rents, harsh yells met his ears, and an occasional shout, as of encouragement. The yells were the yells of Mrs. Blandy, who danced about the gutter, and screamed defiance at the Jepps, one and all. For the Jepps had turned out unsportsmanlike in regard to the spoil of the committee-member, and this was the third day of the consequent row. The fortune of sport had so laid it that the Jepps had received the larger dole, and while the Blandys very properly held that the whole bag, as product of their joint operations, should be put to fair division, the Jepps held fast to all they had got, and kept in the family all the liquor it produced.

"Call yerself a man!" shrieked Mrs. Blandy, who was menacing each member of the opposing family in turn, and now came to its head. "Call yerself a man! Why, look there! There goes the bloomin' Bible-reader. Blimy if 'e ain't a better man than you! 'E don't 'ide away from a woman, any'ow! An' you're a ——"

Mr. Murch hurried on, and entered an open door. Mrs. Bannam's room was on the second floor, but he stopped at a door just within the passage to ask for news. He knocked, but got no answer. Then again, and called, "Mrs. Tapner!" Whereat came a sound from within, between a grunt and a wail, and Murch pushed open the door.

Mrs. Tapner was very fat, very dirty, very much unhooked about the bodice, greatly bedraggled about the hair, and not at all sober. She sat on a stool, and her head lay back against the wall.

"Giddy young kipper!" she gurgled, with a leer. "Giddy young kipper, comin' into a lady's room when she's drunk! 'Ave a lil drop yerself!" And she pointed to a small, flat bottle on the floor beside her.

It was a safe offer, for everybody knew Mr. Murch for a teetotaler. "I came to ask about Mrs. Bannam," he said, "before I go up. I suppose you've not been up there this morning?"

"Mish' Bannam's wuss off 'n me," the woman answered, with a hiccup and a giggle. "I'm in 'eaven; presen'ly she'll be in 'ell, with no 'eaven fust, like what I've got. Doctor's up there now."

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Murch thought he would wait, and see the doctor as he came out. He turned slowly toward the door, and the woman behind him chuckled again.

“What’s good o’ you?” she said. “You bring pore people ’ell out o’ the Bible; others brings us ’eaven—in a quartern bottle.”

“If you was sober you’d be ashamed to know you said such things,” said Mr. Murch. “There’s no ’eaven in the gin-bottle, but bitter repentance. Any one that brings you that’s no friend.”

“Ain’t they? Not when they brings it in a ticket, or a pair o’ boots, or a petticoat? Oh, there’s ways! *You* know.”

Truly he knew, and knew the regular tariff in gin for charity-given shirts and boots and groceries. But the doctor’s step was on the stairs.

“Ah!” said the doctor on the landing; “I won’t be back again unless I’m called, and I know I shan’t be. Two or three hours is about her time—more or less. I suppose you must say something, but I wouldn’t worry her.”

The air of the room was faint and fetid. A rag of old skirt half obscured the grimy window, against which a bare-armed slattern pressed her face, to catch what view she might of the row outside Jepps’. She turned her head at Murch’s entrance, but, seeing who it was, she addressed her eyes again to the window.

The bed was a low one, indefinite as to shape and supports, and covered with the dying woman’s skirts and under-clothes, as suppletory to the insufficient bed-linen. A chair had been planted at the upper end, supported in which she half sat, half lay. Her face was gross and puffy, slaty in hue, and blue about the mouth, and she breathed lightly and quickly, eyes fixed on the wall before her, for to take breath was now conscious and incessant work. Murch stepped quietly across the floor, and knelt beside her.

“Don’t—read,” she said, presently, with a breath between the words.

He had not intended to read, for he remembered the doctor’s caution. Without, the row waxed amain, and it was plain that one Jepp, at least, had sallied from the stronghold. Feet pattered on the pavement, and boys yelled delight. At the window the woman jammed her eye closer, for the fray was drifting up the street.

Murch bent his head for a few seconds. When he looked up the dying woman was regarding him—a little curiously, he thought.

“I’m—goin’—’ard—crool ’ard,” she gasped.

He offered comforting words—though he had said them so often in such cases that they had become a formula, and he felt them a mockery. The row in the street quieted suddenly, and then revived in a new key. No doubt a policeman had arrived.

“Can I do anything to make you comfortable?” Murch asked, softly.

“Ever—know—me—beg?”

“Never once.”

Again her eyes were turned on him with an odd, questing look. “Then—gimme—sixpence—now,” she said.

He wondered. “What is it you want?” he asked.

She made as though to shake her head. “No—gimme—the—sixpence.”

Too well he knew what any bye-chance sixpence went to buy in Randall’s Rents. “But,” he murmured, “I—I’m afraid you’d buy gin with it.”

At the words the slaty mask lit up, and the eyes turned skyward. “Wouldn’t—I—just!” quoth Mrs. Bannam.

He stood, conscious of a strange shock. Well indeed his creed taught him—the hard creed he learned at his mother’s knees—the fate of that lost soul in two hours’ time. And the words were fresh in his ears—the words of the obscene creature leering and rolling below. “No ’eaven fust, like what I’ve got!”

He turned toward the door, his hand to his head. Then he looked, as for help, to the slattern at the window; but though she heard all, she looked without, where two policemen were hauling off her neighbours. His gaze fell last on the bed, and there was a blue, appealing face that looked already from another world.

Two pennies and a sixpence was all left of last week’s pay. He scarce knew his hand had gone to his pocket ere the sixpence was lying on the bed, and he was stumbling blindly on the stairs.

ARTHUR MORRISON.