

## THE AGITATOR'S WIFE.

Tom Arnold was driven home in a cab. It was a novel situation for the secretary of the Seaport Branch of the Dockers' Union. He dismissed it at the end of the street, lest his wife should be alarmed.

He was so weak that he staggered like a drunkard. A spiteful neighbour saw him, and determined to make the most of it.

The street door opened straight into the little living room. The wife was leaning over the child's cot, trying to get it to take something from a spoon. The weary man closed the door noiselessly, and stood looking at his child with his arm around his wife's waist. The emaciated little thing opened its eyes, raised its head slightly, and vomited. Then it uttered a weak cry and breathed heavily.

"I must fetch Crayshaw," said Tom, and he turned to go.

"Not till you've had some porridge." And the wife persisted, seeing with her loving eyes that her husband was dead beaten.

As he hastily ate the porridge, Tom told his wife in a few words of the failure of the conference with the employers, and of Harry Martin's imprisonment.

"They laid a proper trap for Harry," said Tom. "Why, they had the police in a pawnshop right opposite ready for the job. Four blacklegs come along past our committee-room, Harry standing at the door. Then some woman began to chaff them, and one of the fellows swore at her, and used some very foul language. Harry saw there would be mischief, so he runs up to stop it. One of the women slapped the man's face before Harry could get to them, but he seizes her arm, when the chap puts up his hands at Harry, and swears he struck

him. Out came the policemen from the pawnshop, all ready for the fun; they collar Harry, and run him in, sure enough.”

“Why Tom, you don’t mean that!”

“I do, as true as I sit here. They run him in, and knocked him about shameful on the way. When he came into court this morning, I hardly knew him. And then the villains swore he assaulted some free labourers, and was very violent and abusive when arrested, and a lot more lies, that put poor old Harry in for three months’ hard.”

The tears came to Mrs. Arnold’s eyes. She got up to her boy to hide them. Harry Martin was the best friend they had in Seaport – had always stuck by Tom since first they came there, when the Branch was formed chiefly through his efforts.

“And then to hear them humbugs of magistrates talk!” exclaimed Tom, growing angry. “Why, they spoke of Harry as a desperate character – him as wouldn’t hurt a fly if he could help it! They said they would take care Seaport was not ruled by a mob of lawless dockers, and hoped the strikers would take particular notice.”

“They mean to smash us, Mary, and they will do it,” continued Tom in desperation. “And now the boy is going. Where’s the use of carrying on any longer? I feel like ending it, Mary!”

“You are not quite right, Tom. You must –”

“Quite right! No, I suppose I’m not quite right. My God, if that child dies – !”

“Hush, Tom! I can’t bear to hear you talk like that. I’ll go to Crayshaw’s. You’ll be better when you’ve had your supper.”

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“How’s your husband, Mrs. Arnold?” said a man standing beneath a lamp.

“Oh, he’s not himself at all. But I can’t stop. I’m just fetching the doctor.”

It was the spiteful neighbour, who had discovered more matter for the enemy. The Dockers’ secretary coming home drunk in a cab, and the wife going for the doctor, would make a very pretty story.

Further on she met one of the dockers.

“How’s Tom, Mrs. Arnold?”

“Oh, he’s not himself at all. But I can’t stop. I’m just going to the doctor’s.”

“Not had another faint, I hope?”

“Another faint! Why, what do you mean?”

“Why, he had a dead faint in the committee-room, and they sent him home in a cab.

Didn’t he tell you?”

Mrs. Arnold felt angry with her husband, and then a little proud of him, for not telling her.

“And the committee are talking of ending the strike and going to work on Monday.”

“What a shame! And in Tom’s absence. Go and tell them to talk no more nonsense of that sort till Tom comes back in the morning.”

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“How’s Willie, Tom?” exclaimed Mrs. Arnold, as she entered the room, panting.

“I’m going to pull him through, Mary,” said Tom, quietly.

“You fainted, Tom!”

“Yes, I did. But I’m all right now. You go to bed, Mary, and get some sleep.”

“I hear the committee you left are going to give in.”

“Let them give in, and go to hell!” said Tom, wildly.

“And Seaport be the first town to yield! No, Tom! I can’t stand that, if you can. It *will* be hell for the poor men, and for their wives and children, too, if they offer to go back on the masters’ terms. How many of them will get employment, do you think? How many of them will stay in the Union? *You* may pack and go if they offer to return on Monday.”

“What then? I couldn’t get a harder billet, could I?”

“You are not yourself to-night, Tom; I see that. You are played out. Poor old chap! It’s hard work serving these fellows.”

“My God, Mary! I think it will kill me. If you knew all the things I’ve been thinking while you’ve been away, it would frighten you. There’s no right nor justice nowhere when a chap like Harry Martin goes to prison. It makes me feel like ending myself.”

“Tom, Tom! for shame! Think of your boy there!”

“That’s what I did, and what I’m going to do. And I’ve got a notion I’m going to pull him through and make a man of him.”

Tom sat down. He trembled all over as he slowly and tenderly stroked the head of his child.

“Bless his little heart!” said the mother. And she stooped down and gave the boy a gentle kiss. And then she gave Tom a kiss, and then another.

“But what about those poor fellows?”

“It will kill me to go back to them,” said Tom, pathetically.

“And Seaport be the town to give the strike away!” said Mrs. Arnold, sadly, as if talking to herself.

“I’ll see to Willie,” said Tom. “You go to bed, Mary.”

“Don’t be a fool, Tom! If you are beaten, I’m not; and I won’t see the men beaten, either.”

Tom rose slowly and heavily, as though he were lifting the whole earth on his shoulders.

“You’ll let me know, Mary, if anything happens.”

He tried to lift his heavy overcoat from the nail, and failed. Then he sank back on to the chair.

“I’ll mind the boy, Mary,” was all he said. A smile played over his face. Then he burst into a wild hysterical laugh.

Willie cried. Tom was up in an instant to attend to him. Mrs. Arnold sat silently watching and thinking.

“Tom,” she said, at last, “you stay here and do what Crayshaw tells you. I’ll go and see to the strike. At least, it will be a change for both of us.”

The proposal acted like a shower-bath on Tom’s overstrained nerves.

“My word, Mary!” he exclaimed, jumping from his seat, “we’ll try it, and I do believe you’ll bring the men through.”

“And you won’t let Willie slip away from us, Tom, will you?” said the mother, as she bent over her child to give him a parting kiss.

“No, Mary; you’ll find him here when you come back. But when will that be?”

“When the tide has turned, Tom. Good-bye.”

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When Dr. Crayshaw arrived he found Tom Arnold busy washing up and putting things straight.

“I suppose Mrs. Arnold has gone to bed,” he said.

“Oh, no! doctor. We’ve changed places. She’ll see to the men, and I’m going to pull this boy through. And, look here, doctor, if you don’t show me how to do it –”

Just now he would have given away every labour-struggle in the kingdom if he might but save his boy’s life.

Dr. Crayshaw inquired about Tom’s state of health. When he found how matters stood he sent him straight to bed, with a hot bottle at his feet, and a dose of brandy in his stomach.

Then he sat and watched the white and wasted child, and noted every sound and motion. Then he tried the effect of the food on him, but it was brought up again almost as soon as swallowed. Yet the poor little fellow seemed hungry, and eagerly sucked at the spoon. He tried this thing and that added to the food to help digestion. Every twenty minutes a very small quantity was given, until at last one spoonful stayed down, then another, then another, and the child began to sleep very quietly. The Angel of Death slowly spread his wings and flew away.

This was a very eccentric doctor. Sometimes he would take a patient in hand like this – it was usually a child – and, sending everyone else away, would wrestle alone with Death until he had conquered. Doubtless he chose his cases instinctively, but he always won.

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At six o’clock in the morning a messenger came from the mother asking how the child was. In answer to the doctor’s inquiries the man said that Mrs. Arnold was at the committee-room, and that a deal of business had been going on through the night.

He dismissed the man with a message that the boy would live, and that her husband had had a good night’s rest, and was still sleeping.

Then he woke Tom. He did not tell him the victory was won, but said there was more hope, and that everything now depended on how he carried out his instructions. These he gave very minutely, and said he would return at noon.

“Don’t you think I ought to get the wife back?” asked Tom, his night’s rest having restored his interest in the poor dockers.

“From what I heard just now, your wife is wanted where she is.”

A slight pang of jealousy seized Tom, but he was man enough to keep it under.

“Well, doctor,” he said, “I suppose you think I ought to stay here?”

“Yes, I do, until she asks you to change places. Besides, it will be the best thing by far for you. You have had a narrow escape. If you had gone back to those men last night – Well, I don’t want to frighten you. But you know the kind of thoughts that were running through your mind.”

“You might have acted upon them,” added the doctor, very slowly.

“I believe I should,” said Tom, with a shudder.

He sat down by his child’s cot and kissed him tenderly.

“The little fellow saved me,” said Tom, reflectively. “And he’ll pull through, I see. Why, look! he quite knows me! Bless his little heart! You’ve done a good night’s work, doctor.”

“Well, I’ll be back at noon,” he answered; and Tom was left alone.

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Dr. Crayshaw set off home with a quick step. After about three minutes it grew slower. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind about some very difficult question. Once he stopped and turned round. Then he turned again and proceeded on his way home. Again

he turned sharp round and walked off hurriedly along some narrow streets which led by short cuts to the docks.

As he neared the committee-room he overtook the messenger and told him that he would see Mrs. Arnold himself if he would direct him to her.

“Nothing going wrong, sir, I do hope?” said the man, with some feeling.

“Oh, no! The child will live.”

“And our Tom, was he more like himself when you left him?”

“He’s all the better for his night’s rest, but he will have to be very careful.”

“Ah, that he will, I’m sure. But, you see, he’d kill himself for us chaps, any day.”

The doctor knew that there was more truth in this remark than the speaker could realise; and that, but for the strange turn things had taken, Tom’s body might have been found in the docks that morning.

The doctor glanced round at the man by his side. He was a very common specimen of humanity, got up with special regard to cheapness. Badly clothed, badly fed, bent up with cold and hunger, he shuffled along with his hands in his pockets, looking as though there were little but an apology for a man left in him.

“You have been a long while getting here,” remarked the doctor, “for me to be able to overtake you.”

“Ah, I had to go round with that parcel.”

“Indeed! Rather early to be delivering parcels.”

“Well, you see, Mrs. Arnold had us all go home and see what we could fetch for them as is worse off than we are; and my missus put up some things, and I’ve left them at one of

my mate's. I believe that woman is going to pull us through," added the man, and he shuffled along a little quicker and drove his hands deeper into his pockets.

"There's a good deal going to waste in these fellows," said the doctor to himself.

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The church clock struck seven as Dr. Crayshaw entered the dockers' committee-room. Tom's wife was seated at a table, with a number of men around her. The moment she looked up and saw who had entered, her face turned deadly white, and her lips went thin and bloodless. The doctor's heart was touched. He hastened to assure her that all was going on as well as possible, both with child and husband. When she learned that Dr. Crayshaw had sat up all night with her child, she felt like putting her arms round his neck and kissing him.

"So all is well at home, thank God! And thank you, too, doctor. Now I must get back to these poor fellows. It won't do for me to fail in my part."

"You are an extraordinary woman, Mrs. Arnold!" said the doctor, with a look of genuine admiration.

Mrs. Arnold's mind was back to business. She saw that such a look as that ought to be worth something.

All night long she had been getting out tubs and buckets for a big rainfall. But she had no idea where the rain was to come from.

In other words, she had been ordering a large number of collecting boxes to be made, and had begun to organise groups of women to carry them all over the town. "Women will get a lot more than you men," she said. And the men assented. The more useless sex she was employing for the heavier work of collecting food and clothing.

These were her tubs and buckets, which she was setting out. But she did not know where the refreshing shower of public sympathy was coming from. For, unfortunately, public sympathy was with the shipowners; the police-court cases, of which Harry Martin's was a type, having told heavily against the dockers.

"You are an extraordinary woman," the doctor had said, with a look of admiration. "But I want your help, doctor. You won't help a man, and then see a woman beaten."

And then, before the doctor could express his astonishment at such a remarkable suggestion, Mrs. Arnold began telling him what her work of the night had been.

"But you have no public sympathy," said the doctor. "You see the cases in the police courts –"

Mrs. Arnold stopped him, and explained the facts, especially those connected with the arrest of Harry Martin. The doctor sat down and listened patiently.

Then she pictured to him the extreme suffering of the women and children – innocent victims in this terrible dispute.

"Now, doctor, you will help me to help these poor people, won't you?"

"But, Mrs. Arnold, all this is quite outside my profession, you know. I don't interfere in cases I don't understand."

"The wife of one of our men died last night in confinement just for want of proper food and clothing. That's a case you can understand, doctor."

"But what can I do?"

"You can write a letter to the EVENING NEWS, and start a fund for feeding and clothing the women and children, leaving on one side the merits of the struggle altogether."

"Start a fund to support the strikers! Why! Mrs. Arnold!"

“The women and children are not on strike. Our nurses in a war tend the enemy’s wounded. Surely you can help to stay loss of life through starvation! As a doctor, your action would be very fitting.”

“Well, you are an extraordinary woman, Mrs. Arnold!”

“And you are not an ordinary man, doctor, or you would not have saved the life of my child. I want you to help to save other lives now. Why, even these poor hungry fellows here are making great sacrifices to do it. See how ill-fed and badly-clothed they are. At home they have ill fed and clothed wives and children. Yet this very night they have been fetching bits of food and clothing from their wretched homes to take to those who are even worse off than they are. What are *you* going to do, doctor?”

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That night Mrs. Arnold returned home. “The tide has turned, Tom,” she said, quietly. She held an EVENING NEWS in her hand. In it appeared a long letter from Dr. Crayshaw, appealing for help for the starving women and children, and starting a subscription list with a cheque for £100. Below were other amounts which he had collected from a few prominent men in Seaport.

“I wondered why he didn’t come back at noon,” said Tom, when he had got over the first shock of gladness. “But Willie’s been going on splendid, so I didn’t trouble.”

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It little mattered that the report spread that Tom Arnold had returned home drunk in a cab after a mass meeting of strikers. The tide *had* turned. In three weeks all the ports of the kingdom were open to the men on the old terms, and it was generally admitted that Seaport had won the victory.

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