

ARTHUR

TIMOTHY SHAY

THE TWO WIVES; OR,
LOST AND WON

Timothy Arthur

The Two Wives; Or, Lost and Won

«Public Domain»

Arthur T.

The Two Wives; Or, Lost and Won / T. Arthur — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	14
CHAPTER V	18
CHAPTER VI	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

T. S. Arthur

The Two Wives; Or, Lost and Won

PREFACE

THE story of the "Two Wives; or, Lost and Won," is intended to show the power of tender, earnest, self-forgetting love, in winning back from the path of danger a husband whose steps have strayed, and who has approached the very brink of ruin; and, by contrast, to exhibit the sad consequences flowing from a want of these virtues under like circumstances.

This book is the third in the Series of "ARTHUR'S LIBRARY FOR THE HOUSEHOLD." The fourth, which is nearly ready, will be called "THE WAYS OF PROVIDENCE; OR, HE DOETH ALL THINGS WELL."

CHAPTER I

"YOU are not going out, John?" said Mrs. Wilkinson, looking up from the work she had just taken into her hands. There was a smile on her lips; but her eyes told, plainly enough, that a cloud was upon her heart.

Mrs. Wilkinson was sitting by a small work-table, in a neatly furnished room. It was evening, and a shaded lamp burned upon the table. Mr. Wilkinson, who had been reading, was standing on the floor, having thrown down his book and risen up hastily, as if a sudden purpose had been formed in his mind.

"I shall only be gone a little while, dear," returned Mr. Wilkinson, a slight air of impatience visible beneath his kind voice and manner.

"Don't go, John," said Mrs. Wilkinson, still forcing a smile to her countenance. "I always feel so lonely when you are away. We only have our evenings to be together; and I cannot bear then to be robbed of your company. Don't go out, John; that's a good, dear husband."

And Mrs. Wilkinson, in the earnestness of her desire to keep her husband at home, laid aside her sewing, and rising, approached and leaned her hands upon his shoulder, looking up with an affectionate, appealing expression into his face.

"You're a dear, good girl, Mary," said Mr. Wilkinson, tenderly, and he kissed the pure lips of his wife as he spoke. "I know it's wrong to leave you alone here. But, I won't be gone more than half an hour. Indeed I won't. See, now;" and he drew forth his watch; "it is just eight o'clock, and I will be home again precisely at half-past eight, to a minute."

Mrs. Wilkinson made no answer; but her husband saw that tears were in the eyes fixed so lovingly upon him.

"Now don't, love," said he, tenderly, "make so much of just half an hour's absence. I promised Elbridge that I would call around and see him about a little matter of business, and I must keep my word. I had forgotten the engagement until it crossed my mind while reading."

"If you have an engagement." There was a certain emphasis in the words of Mrs. Wilkinson that caused her husband to partly turn his face away.

"I have, dear. But for that, I should not think of leaving you alone."

Almost instinctively Mrs. Wilkinson withdrew the hands she had placed upon the shoulder of her husband, and receded from him a step or two; at the same time her face was bent downwards, and her eyes rested upon the floor.

For some moments Mr. Wilkinson stood as if in earnest debate with himself; then he said, in a cheerful, lively tone—

"Good-by, love. I shall only be gone half an hour." And turning away, left the room. He did not pause until he was in the street. Then a spirit of irresolution came over him, and he said to himself, as he moved slowly away,

"It isn't kind in me to leave Mary alone in this way; I know it isn't. But I want to see Elbridge; and, in fact, partly promised that I would call upon him this evening. True, I can say all I wish to say to him in the morning, and to quite as good purpose. But—"

Wilkinson, whose steps had been growing more and more deliberate, stopped. For some time he stood, in a thoughtful attitude—then slowly returned. His hand was in his pocket, his dead-latch key between his fingers, and his foot upon the marble sill of his door. And thus he remained, in debate with himself, for as long a time as two or three minutes.

"Yes; I must see him! I had forgotten that," he exclaimed, in a low tone, and suddenly stepped back from the door, and with a rapid pace moved down the street. A walk of ten minutes brought him to the house of Mr. Elbridge. But it so happened that this gentleman was not at home.

"How soon do you expect him to return?" was inquired of the servant.

"He may be here in half an hour; or not before ten o'clock," was the reply.

Wilkinson was disappointed. Leaving his name with the servant, and saying that he would probably call again during the evening, he descended the steps and walked away. He was moving in the direction of his home, and had arrived within a block thereof when he stopped, saying to himself as he did so—

"I must see Elbridge this evening. It is already nearly half an hour since I left home, and I promised Mary that I would not remain away a moment longer than that time. But, I did not think Elbridge would be out. Poor Mary! She looks at me with such sad eyes, sometimes, that it goes to my very heart. She cannot bear to have me out of her sight. Can she doubt me in any thing? No; I will not believe that. She is a loving, gentle-minded creature—and one of the best of wives. Ah me! I wish I were more like her."

Still Wilkinson remained standing, and in debate with himself.

"I will go home," said he, at length, with emphasis, and walked quickly onward. He was within a few doors of his own home, when his steps began to linger again. He had come once more into a state of irresolution.

"Perhaps Elbridge has returned." This thought made him stop again. "He must have understood me that I would be around."

Just at this moment the crying of a child was heard.

"Is that Ella?" Wilkinson walked around a little way, until he came nearly opposite his own house. Then he stopped to listen more attentively.

Yes. It was the grieving cry of his own sick babe.

"Poor child!" he murmured. "I wonder what can ail her?"

He looked up at the chamber windows. The curtains were drawn aside, and he saw upon the ceiling of the room the shadow of some one moving to and fro. He did not doubt that it was the shadow of his wife, as, with their sick babe in her arms, she walked to and fro in the effort to soothe it again to sleep. Had there been a doubt, it would have been quickly dispelled, for there came to his ears the soft tones of a voice he knew full well—came in tones of music, low and soothing, but with most touching sweetness. It was the voice of his wife, and she sang the air of the cradle-hymn with which he had been soothed to rest when he lay an innocent babe in his mother's arms.

The feelings of Wilkinson, a good deal excited by the struggle between affection and duty on the one side, and appetite and inclination on the other, were touched and softened by the incident, and he was about entering his house when the approaching form of a man, a short distance in advance, caught his eye, and he paused until he came up.

"Elbridge! The very one I wished to see!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, as he extended his hand and grasped that of his friend. "I've just been to your house. Did you forget that I was to call around?"

"I didn't understand you to say, certainly, that you would call, or I should have made it a point to be at home. But no matter. All in good time. I'm on my way home now, and you will please return with me."

"I don't know about that," said Wilkinson, who could not forget his promise to his wife. "I told Mary, when I went out, that I would only be gone half an hour, and that time has expired already."

"Oh, never mind," returned the other, lightly. "She'll forgive you, I'll be bound. Tell her that you came home, in all obedience to her wishes, but that I met you at your own door, and carried you off in spite of yourself."

And as Elbridge said this, he drew his arm within that of Wilkinson, and the two men went chatting away.

Elbridge was fond of good wine, and always kept a few choice bottles on hand. Wilkinson knew this; and, if he had looked narrowly into his heart on the present occasion, he would have discovered that the wine of his friend had for him a stronger attraction than his company.

As the latter had anticipated, wine and cigars were produced immediately on their arrival at the house of Elbridge; and in the exhilaration of the one and the fumes of the other, he soon forgot his lonely, troubled wife and sick child at home.

A friend or two dropped in, in the course of half an hour; and then a second bottle of wine was uncorked, and glasses refilled with its sparkling contents.

The head of Wilkinson was not very strong. A single glass of wine generally excited him, and two or three proved, always, more than he could bear. It was so on this occasion; and when, at eleven o'clock, he passed forth from the house of his friend, it was only by an effort that he could walk steadily. The cool night air, as it breathed upon his heated brow, partially sobered him, and his thoughts turned towards his home. A sigh and the act of striking his hand upon his forehead marked the effect of this transition of thought.

"Poor Mary! I didn't mean to stay away so late. I meant to return in half an hour," he muttered, half aloud. "But this is always the way. I'm afraid I've taken too much of Elbridge's wine; a little affects me. I wonder if Mary will notice it; I wouldn't have her to do so for the world. Poor child! it would frighten her to death. I rather think I'd better try to walk off the effects of what I've been drinking. It's late, any how, and fifteen or twenty minutes will make but little difference either way."

As Wilkinson said this, he turned down a cross street which he happened to be passing at the moment, and moved along with a quicker pace. Gradually the confusion of his thoughts subsided.

"I wish I had remained at home," he sighed, as the image of his wife arose distinctly in his mind. "Poor Mary! I broke my word with her, though I promised so faithfully. Oh, dear! this weakness on my part is terrible. Why was I so anxious to see Elbridge? there was no real engagement, and yet I told Mary there was. I would not have her know of this deception for the world. I forgot about dear little Ella's being so sick; what if we should lose that little angel? Oh! I could not bear it!"

Wilkinson stopped suddenly as this thought flashed over his mind. He was soberer by far than when he left the house of Mr. Elbridge.

"I'll go home at once." He turned and began quickly retracing his steps. And now he remembered the moving shadow on the wall, as he stood, nearly three hours before, in front of his house, debating with himself whether to enter or no. He heard too, in imagination, the plaintive cries of his sick child, and the soothing melody of its mother's voice as she sought to hush into sleep its unquiet spirit.

CHAPTER II

WILKINSON was nearly in front of his own door, when he was thus familiarly accosted by a man named Ellis, who came leisurely walking along with a lighted cigar in his mouth.

"Hallo! is this you, Wilkinson? What in the name of wonder are you doing out at such an hour?"

"And suppose I were to ask you the same question?" inquired Wilkinson, as he took the hand of the other, who was an old acquaintance.

"It would be easily answered," was the unhesitating reply of Ellis, who had been drinking rather freely.

"Well, suppose I have the benefit of your answer."

"You're quite welcome. I keep no secrets from an old friend, you see. Can't you guess?"

"I'm not good at guessing."

"Had a little tiff with Cara," said Ellis in a half whisper, as he bent to the ear of his companion.

"Oh, no!" returned Wilkinson.

"Fact. Cara's a dear, good soul, as you know; but she's a self-willed little jade, and if I don't do just as she wants me to—if I don't walk her chalk line—*presto!* she goes off like a rocket. To-night, d'ye see, I came home with the first volume of Prescott's new work on Mexico—a perfect romance of a book, and wanted to read it aloud to Cara. But no, she had something else in her head, and told me, up and down, that she didn't want to hear any of my dull old histories. I got mad, of course; I always get mad when she comes athwart my haves in this way.

"'Dull old histories!' said I, indignantly. 'There's more true life and real interest in this book than in all the Wandering Jews or Laura Matilda novels that ever were written; and I wish you'd throw such miserable trash into the fire, and read books from which to get some intelligence and strength of mind.' Whew! The way she combed my hair for me at this was curious. I am a philosopher, and on these occasions generally repeat to myself the wise saw—

'He that fights and runs away,
May live to fight another day.'

So, deeming discretion the better part of valour, I retreated in disorder."

"That's bad," remarked Wilkinson, who knew something of the character of his friend's wife.

"I know it's bad; but, then, I can't help myself. Cara has such a queer temper, I never know how to take her."

"You ought to understand her peculiarities by this time, and bear with them."

"Bear with them! I'd like to see you have the trial for a while; your wife is an angel. Ah, John! you're a lucky dog. If I had such a sweet-tempered woman in my house, I would think it a very paradise."

"Hush! hush! Harry; don't speak in that way. Few women possess so many good qualities as Mrs. Ellis; and it is your duty to cherish and love the good, and to bear with the rest."

"Well preached; but, as I am to apply the discourse, and not you, I must beg to be excused."

"Good-night. Go home, kiss Cara, and forgive her," said Wilkinson; and he made a motion to pass on, adding, as he did so, "I'm out much later than usual, and am in a hurry to get back. Mary will be uneasy about me."

But Ellis caught hold of one of his arms with both hands, and held on to him.

"Can't let you go, Wilkinson" said he, firmly. "You're the man of all others I want to see—been thinking about you all the evening; want to have a long talk with you."

"Any other time, but not now," replied Wilkinson.

"Now, and no other time," persisted the other, clinging fast to his arm.

"What do you wish to talk about?" said Wilkinson, ceasing his effort to release himself from the firm grip of his friend.

"About Cara," was answered.

"Go home and make it up with her; that's the best way. She loves you, and you love her; and your love will settle all differences. And besides, Harry, you shouldn't talk about these things to other people. The relation between man and wife is too sacred for this."

"Do you think I talk in this way to everybody? No, indeed!" responded Ellis, in a half-offended tone of voice. "But you're a particular friend. You know Cara's peculiar temper, and can advise with me as a friend. So come along, I want to have a talk with you."

"Come where?"

Ellis turned and pointed to a brilliant gas lamp in the next square, that stood in front of a much frequented tavern.

"No, no; I must go home." And Wilkinson tried to extricate himself from the firm grasp of his friend. But the latter tightened his hold, as he said—

"It's of no use. I shall not let you go. So come along with me to Parker's. Over a couple of brandy toddies we will discuss this matter of Cara's."

A vigorous jerk from the hand of Ellis gave the body of Wilkinson a motion in the direction of the tavern. Had his mind been perfectly clear—had none of the effects of his wine-drinking at Elbridge's remained, he would have resisted to the end this solicitation, at the hour and under the circumstances. But his mind was not perfectly clear. And so, a few steps being taken by compulsion, he moved on by a sort of constrained volition.

As mentioned above, Wilkinson had nearly reached his own door when he encountered Ellis; was, in fact, so near, that he could see the light shining from the chamber-window through which, some hours before, he had marked on the wall the flitting shadow of his wife, as she walked to and fro, seeking to soothe into slumber her sick and grieving child. For nearly five minutes, he had stood talking with his friend, and the sound of their voices might easily have been heard in his dwelling, if one had been listening intently there. And one was listening with every sense strung to the acutest perception. Just as Wilkinson moved away, an observer would have seen the door of his house open, and a slender female form bend forth, and look earnestly into the darkness. A moment or two, she stood thus, and then stepped forth quickly, and leaning upon the iron railing of the door steps, fixed eagerly her eyes upon the slowly receding forms of the two men.

"John! John!" she called, in half suppressed tones.

But her voice did not reach the ear of her husband, whose form she well knew, even in the obscurity of night.

Gliding down the steps, Mrs. Wilkinson ran a few paces along the pavement, but suddenly stopped as some thought passed through her mind; and, turning, went back to the door she had left. There she stood gazing after her husband, until she saw him enter the tavern mentioned as being kept by a man named Parker, when, with a heavy, fluttering sigh, she passed into the house, and ascended to the chamber from which she had, a few minutes before, come down.

It was past eleven o'clock. The two domestics had retired, and Mrs. Wilkinson was alone with her sick child. Ella's moan of suffering came on her ear the instant she re-entered the room, and she stepped quickly to the crib, and bent over to look into its face. The cheeks of the child were flushed with fever to a bright crimson, and she was moving her head from side to side, and working her lips as if there was something in her mouth. Slight twitching motions of the arms and hands were also noticed by the mother. Her eyes were partly open.

"Will Ella have a drink of water?" said Mrs. Wilkinson, placing her hand under the child's head, and slightly raising it from the pillow.

But Ella did not seem to hear.

"Say—love, will you have some water?"

There was no sign that her words reached the child's ears.

A deeper shade of trouble than that which already rested on the mother's face glanced over it. "Ella! Ella!" Mrs. Wilkinson slightly shook the child.

The only response was the muttering of some incoherent words, and a continued moaning as if pain were disturbing her sleep.

The mother now bent low over her child, and eagerly marked the expression of her face and the character of her breathing. Then she laid a hand upon her cheek. Instantly it was withdrawn with a quick start, but as quickly replaced again.

"What a burning fever!" she murmured. Then she added, in a tone of anxiety,

"How strangely she works her mouth! I don't like this constant rolling of her head. What can it mean? Ella! Ella!"

And she shook the child again.

"Want some water, love?"

The mother's voice did not appear to reach the locked sense of hearing.

Mrs. Wilkinson now lifted a glass of water from the bureau near by, and raising the head of Ella with one hand, applied, with the other, the water to her lips. About a table-spoonful was poured into her mouth. It was not swallowed, but ran out upon the pillow.

"Mercy! mercy! what can ail the child!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilkinson, a look of fear coming into her face.

A little while she stood over her, and then leaving her place beside the crib, she hurried out into the passage, and, pausing at the bottom of the stairs leading to the room above, called several times—

"Anna! Anna! Anna!"

But no answer came. The domestic thus summoned had fallen into her first sound sleep, and the voice did not penetrate her ears.

"Anna!" once more called Mrs. Wilkinson.

There was no response, but the reverberation of her own voice returned upon the oppressive silence. She now hurried back to her sick child, whose low, troubled moaning had not been hushed for a moment.

There was no apparent change. Ella lay with her half-opened eyes, showing, by the white line, that the balls were turned up unnaturally; with her crimsoned cheeks, and with the nervous motions of her lips and slight twitchings of her hands, at first noticed with anxiety and alarm.

Mrs. Wilkinson was but little familiar with sickness in children; and knew not the signs of real danger—or, rather, what unusual signs such as those now apparent in Ella really indicated. But she was sufficiently alarmed, and stood over the child, with her eyes fixed eagerly upon her.

Again she tried to arouse her from so strange and unnatural a state, but with as little effect as at first.

"Oh, my husband!" she at length exclaimed, clasping her hands together, and glancing upward, with tearful eyes, "why are you away from me now? Oh, why did you break your promise to return hours and hours ago?"

Then covering her face with her hands, she sobbed and wept, until, startled by a sharp, unnatural cry from the lips of Ella, her attention was once more fixed upon her suffering child.

CHAPTER III

"Now, what will you take?" said Henry Ellis, as he entered, with the weak and yielding Wilkinson, the bar-room of Parker's tavern.

"Any thing you choose to call for," replied Wilkinson, whose mind was turning homeward, and who wished to be there. "In fact, I don't really want any thing. Call for two glasses of cold water. These will leave our heads clear."

"Water! Ha! ha! That is a good one, Bill"—and Ellis spoke to the bar-tender—"Mix us a couple of stiff brandy toddies."

The bar-tender nodded and smiled his acceptance of the order, and the two men retired to a table that stood in a remote part of the room, at which they were soon served with the liquor.

"Bill mixes the best brandy toddy I ever tasted. He knows his business," said Ellis, as he put the glass to his lips. "Isn't it fine?"

"It is very good," replied Wilkinson, as he sipped the tempting mixture.

But his thoughts were turning homeward, and he scarcely perceived the taste of what he drank. Suddenly, he pushed the glass from him, and, making a motion to rise from the table, said—

"Indeed, Ellis, I must go home. My child is sick, and Mary will be distressed at my absence. Come around to my store, to-morrow, and we will talk this matter over. Neither you nor I are now in a fit state to discuss so grave a matter.

"Sit down, will you!"

This was the reply of Ellis, as he caught quickly the arm of his friend, and almost forced him, by main strength, to resume his seat.

"There, now," he added, as Wilkinson resumed his seat. "Never put off until to-morrow what can as well be done to-day. That is my motto. I want to talk with you about Cara, and no time is so good as the present."

"Well, well," returned Wilkinson, impatiently. "What do you want to say? Speak quickly, and to the point."

"Just what I'm going to do. But, first, I must see the bottom of my tumbler. There, now; come, you must do the same. Drink to good old times, and eternal friendship—drink, my fast and faithful friend!"

The warmth of the room and the quick effects of a strong glass of brandy toddy were making rapid advances on Ellis's partial state of inebriety.

Wilkinson emptied his glass, and then said—

"Speak, now, I'm all attention."

"Well, you see, Jack," and Ellis leaned over towards Wilkinson familiarly, and rested his arm upon his knee. "You see, Jack, that huzzy of mine—if I must call the dear girl by such a name—is leading me the deuce of a life. Confound her pretty face! I love her, and would do almost any thing to please her; but she won't be pleased at any thing. She combs my head for me as regularly as the day comes."

"Hush—hush! Don't talk so of Cara. Her temper may be a little uncertain, but that is her weakness. She is your wife, and you must bear with these things. It isn't manly in you to be vexed at every trifle."

"Trifle! Humph! I'd like you to have a week of my experience. You wouldn't talk any more about trifles."

"You should humour her a great deal, Harry. I am not so sure that you are not quite as much to blame for these differences and fallings out as she is."

"I wasn't to blame to-night, I am sure. Didn't I bring home Prescott, thinking that she would be delighted to have me sit the evening with her and read so charming an author? But, at the very

proposition, she flared up, and said she didn't want to hear my musty old histories. Humph! A nice way to make a man love his home. Better for her and me, too, I'm thinking, that she had listened to the history, and kept her husband by her side."

"And for me, too," thought Wilkinson. "I should now, at least, be at home with my loving-hearted wife. Ah, me!"

"Now, what am I to do, Jack—say? Give me your advice."

"The first thing for you to do is to go home, and to go at once. Come!"

And Wilkinson made another effort to rise; but the hand of Ellis bore him down.

"Stay, stay!" he muttered, impatiently. "Now don't be in such a confounded hurry. Can't you talk with an old friend for a minute or so? Look here, I've been thinking—let me see—what was I going to say?"

The mind of Ellis was growing more and more confused; nor was the head of Wilkinson so clear as when he entered the bar-room. The strong glass of brandy toddy was doing its work on both of them.

"Let me see," went on Ellis, in a wandering way. "I was speaking of Cara—oh, yes, of Cara. Bless her heart, but confound her crooked temper! Now, what would you advise me to do, my old friend?"

"Go home, I have said," replied Wilkinson.

"And get my head combed with a three-legged stool? No, blast me if I do! I've stayed out this long just to make her sensible of her unkindness to one of the best of husbands—and I'm not going home until I am dead drunk. I guess that'll bring her to her bearings. Ha! Don't you think so, Jack?"

"Good heavens!" was just at this instant exclaimed by one of the inmates of the bar-room, in a low, startled tone of voice.

"Your wife, as I live!" fell from the lips of Ellis, whose face was turned towards the entrance of the bar-room.

Wilkinson sprang to his feet. Just within the door stood a female form, her head uncovered, her under person clad in a white wrapper, and her face colourless as the dress she wore. There was a wild, frightened look in her staring eyes.

"Is Mr. Wilkinson here?" she asked, just as her husband's eyes rested upon her, and her thrilling voice reached his ears.

With a bound, Wilkinson was at her side.

"Oh, John! John!" she cried, in a voice of anguish. "Come home! Come quick! Our dear little Ella is dying!"

An instant more, and, to the inmates of the bar-room, the curtain fell upon that startling scene; for Wilkinson and his wife vanished almost as suddenly as if they had sunk together through the floor.

CHAPTER IV

DURING the day on which our story opened, Henry Ellis had obtained from a friend the first volume of Prescott's History of Mexico, then just from the press. An hour's perusal of its fascinating pages awakened in his mind a deep interest.

"Just the book to read to Cara," said he to himself, closing the volume, and laying it aside. "She's too much taken up with mere fiction. But here is that truth which is stranger than fiction; and I am sure she will soon get absorbed in the narrative."

With his new book, and this pleasant thought in his mind, Ellis took his way homeward, after the business of the day was over. As he walked along, a friend overtook him, and said, familiarly, as he touched him on the shoulder,

"I'm glad to overhaul you so opportunely. Half a dozen times, to-day, I have been on the eve of running round to see you, but as often was prevented. All in good time yet, I hope. I want you to come over to my room, this evening. There are to be three or four of our friends there, and some good eating and drinking into the bargain."

"A temptation certainly," replied Ellis. "No man likes good company better than I do; but, I rather think I must forego the pleasure this time."

"Why do you say that?"

"I've promised myself another pleasure."

"Another engagement?"

"Not exactly that. Barker has loaned me the first volume of Prescott's Mexico; and I'm going to spend the evening in reading it to my wife."

"Any other evening will do as well for that," returned the friend. "So promise me to come around. I can't do without you."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Ellis, firmly. "But, when I once get my mind fixed on a thing, I am hard to change."

"Perhaps your wife may have some engagement on hand, for the evening, or be disinclined for reading. What then?"

"You will see me at your room," was the prompt answer of Ellis; and the words were uttered with more feeling than he had intended to exhibit. The very question brought unpleasant images before his mind.

"I shall look for you," said the friend, whose name was Jerome. "Good evening!"

"Good evening! Say to your friends, if I should not be there, that I am in better company."

The two men parted, and Ellis kept on his way homeward. Not until the suggestion of Jerome that his wife might be disinclined to hear him read, did a remembrance of Cara's uncertain temper throw a shade across his feelings. He sighed as he moved onward.

"I wish she were kinder and more considerate," he said to himself. "I know that I don't always do right; yet, I am not by any means so bad as she sometimes makes me out. To any thing reasonable, I am always ready to yield. But when she frowns if I light a cigar; and calls me a tippler whenever she detects the smell of brandy and water, I grow angry and stubborn. Ah, me!"

Ellis sighed heavily. A little way he walked on, and then began communing with himself.

"I don't know"—he went on—"but, may be, I do take a little too much sometimes. I rather think I must have been drinking too freely when I came home last week: by the way Cara talked, and by the way she acted for two or three days afterwards. There may be danger. Perhaps there is. My head isn't very strong; and it doesn't take much to affect me. I wish Cara wouldn't speak to me as she does sometimes. I can't bear it. Twice within the last month, she has fairly driven me off to spend my evening in a tavern, when I would much rather have been at home. Ah, me! It's a great mistake. And Cara may find it out, some day, to her sorrow. I like a glass of brandy, now and then;

but I'm not quite so far gone that I must have it whether or no. I'm foolish, I will own, to mind her little, pettish, fretful humours. I ought to be more of a man than I am. But, I didn't make myself, and can't help feeling annoyed, and sometimes angry, when she is unkind and unreasonable. Going off to a tavern don't mend the matter, I'll admit; but, when I leave the house, alone, after nightfall, and in a bad humour, it is the most natural thing in the world for me to seek the pleasant company of some of my old friends—and I generally know where to find them."

Such was the state of mind in which Ellis returned home.

A word or two will give the reader a better idea of the relation which Henry Ellis and his wife bore to each other and society. They had been married about six years, and had three children, the oldest a boy, and the other two girls. Ellis kept a retail dry-goods store, in a small way. His capital was limited, and his annual profits, therefore, but light. The consequence was, that, in all his domestic arrangements, the utmost frugality had to be observed. He was a man of strict probity, with some ambition to get ahead in the world. These made him careful and economical in his expenditures, both at home and in the management of his business. As a man, he was social in his feelings, but inclined to be domestic. While unmarried, he had lived rather a gay life, and formed a pretty large acquaintance among young men. His associations led him into the pretty free use of intoxicating drinks; but the thought of becoming a slave of a vicious appetite never once crossed his mind with its warning shadow.

The first trial of Henry Ellis's married life was the imperative necessity that required him to lay a restraining hand upon his wife's disposition to spend money more freely than was justified by their circumstances. He had indulged her for the period of a whole year, and the result was so heavy a balance against his expense account, that he became anxious and troubled. There must be a change, or his business would be crippled, and ultimate ruin follow. As gently as he could, Ellis brought the attention of his wife to this matter. But, she could not comprehend, to its full extent, the point he urged. It then became necessary for Ellis to hold the purse-strings more tightly than he had formerly done. This fretted the mind of his wife, and often led her, in the warmth of the moment of disappointment, to utter unkind expressions. These hurt Ellis; and, sometimes, made him angry. The cloud upon Cara's brow, consequent upon these occasional misunderstandings, was generally so unpleasant to Ellis, whose heart was ever wooing the sunshine, let the rays come through almost any medium, that he would spend his evenings abroad. Temptation, as a natural consequence, was in his way. His convivial character made him seek the company of those who do not always walk the safest paths. How anxious should be the wife of such a husband to keep him at home; how light the task would have been for Cara. Alas! that she was so selfish, so self-willed—so blind! The scene that occurred on the evening of Ellis's return home with the book he wished to read for his wife, will give a fair view of Mrs. Ellis's manner of reacting upon her husband; and his mode of treating her on such occasions.

It has been seen in what state of feeling the husband returned home. Remembrances of the past brought some natural misgivings to his mind. His face, therefore, wore rather a more subdued expression than usual. Still, he was in a tolerably cheerful frame of mind—in fact, he was never moody. To his great relief, Cara met him with a smile, and seemed to be in an unusually good humour. Their sweet babe was lying asleep on her lap; and his other two children were playing about the room. Instantly the sunshine fell warmly again on the heart of Ellis. He kissed mother and children fervently, and with a deep sense of love.

"I called to see the bride this afternoon," said Mrs. Ellis, soon after her husband came in.

"Ah, did you?" he answered. "At her new home?"

"Yes."

"She is well and happy, of course?"

"Oh, yes; happy as the day is long. How could she help being so in such a little paradise?"

"Love makes every spot a paradise," said Ellis.

"Beg your pardon," replied the wife, with some change in her tone of voice. "I'm no believer in that doctrine. I want something more than love. External things are of account in the matter; and of very considerable account."

"They have every thing very handsome, of course," said Ellis; who was generally wise enough not to enter into a discussion with his wife on subjects of this kind.

"Oh, perfect!" replied his wife, "perfect! I never saw a house furnished with so much taste. I declare it has put me half out of conceit with things at home. Oh, dear! how common every thing did look when I returned."

"You must remember that our furniture has been in use for about six years," said Ellis; "and, moreover, that it was less costly than your friend's, in the beginning. Her husband and your's are in different circumstances."

"I know all about that," was returned, with a toss of the head. "I know that we are dreadfully poor, and can hardly get bread for our children."

"We are certainly not able to furnish as handsomely as Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont. There is no denying that, Cara. Still, we are able to have every real comfort of life; and therewith let us try to be content. To desire what we cannot possess, will only make us unhappy."

"You needn't preach to me," retorted Mrs. Ellis, her face slightly flushing. "When I want to hear a sermon, I'll go to church."

Mr. Ellis made no answer, but, lifting his babe from its mother's lap, commenced tossing it in the air and singing a pleasant nursery ditty. Caroline sat in a moody state of mind for some minutes, and then left the room to give some directions about tea. On her return, Ellis said, in as cheerful a voice as if no unpleasant incident had transpired,

"Oh! I had forgotten to say, Cara, that Mr. Hemming and his wife have returned from Boston. They will be around to see us some evening this week."

"Hum-m—well." This was the cold, moody response of Mrs. Ellis.

"Mr. Hemming says that his wife's health is much better than it was."

"Does he?" very coldly uttered.

"He seemed very cheerful."

Mrs. Ellis made no comment upon this remark of her husband, and the latter said nothing more.

Tea was soon announced, and the husband and wife went, with their two oldest children, to partake of their evening meal. A cloud still hung over Caroline's features. Try as Ellis would to feel indifferent to his wife's unhappy state of mind, his sensitiveness to the fact became more and more painful every moment. The interest at first felt in his children, gradually died away, and, by the time supper was over, he was in a moody and fretted state, yet had he manfully striven to keep his mind evenly balanced.

On returning to the sitting-room, the sight of the book he had brought home caused Ellis to make a strong effort to regain his self-possession. He had set his heart on reading that book to Cara, because he was sure she would get interested therein; and he hoped, by introducing this better class of reading, to awaken a healthier appetite for mental food than she now possessed. So he occupied himself with a newspaper, while his wife undressed the children and put them to bed. It seemed to him a long time before she was ready to sit down with her sewing at the table, upon which the soft, pleasant light of their shaded lamp was falling. At last she came, with her small work-basket in her mind. Topmost of all its contents was a French novel. When Ellis saw this, there came doubts and misgivings across his heart.

"Cara," said he quickly, and in a tone of forced cheerfulness, taking up, at the same time, his volume of Prescott,— "I brought this book home on purpose to read aloud. I dipped into it, to-day, and found it so exceedingly interesting, that I deferred the pleasure of its perusal until I could share it with you."

Now, under all the circumstances, it cost Ellis considerable effort to appear cheerful and interested, while saying this.

"What book is it?" returned Cara, in a chilling tone, while her eyes were fixed upon her husband's face, with any thing but a look of love.

"The first volume of Prescott's History of Mexico, one of the most charming"—

"Pho! I don't want to hear your dull old histories!" said Cara, with a contemptuous toss of the head.

"Dull old histories!" retorted Ellis, whose patience was now gone. "Dull old histories! You don't know what you are talking about. There's more real interest in this book than in all the French novels that ever were invented to turn silly women's heads."

Of course, Mrs. Ellis "fired up" at this. She was just at the right point of ignition to blaze out at a single breath of reproof. We will not repeat the cutting language she used to her husband. Enough, that, in the midst of the storm that followed, Ellis started up, and bowing, with mock ceremony, said—

"I wish you good evening, madam. And may I see you in a better humour when we meet again."

A moment afterwards, and Caroline was alone with her own perturbed feelings and unpleasant, self-rebuking thoughts. Still, she could not help muttering, as a kind of justification of her own conduct—

"A perfect Hotspur! It's rather hard that a woman can't speak to her husband, but he must fling himself off in this way. Why didn't he read his history, if it was so very interesting, and let me alone. I don't care about such things, and he knows it."

After this, Mrs. Ellis fell into a state of deep and gloomy abstraction of mind. Many images of the past came up to view, and, among them, some that it was by no means pleasant to look upon. This was not the first time that her husband had gone off in a pet; but in no instance had he come home with a mind as clear as when he left her. A deep sigh heaved the wife's bosom as she remembered this; and, for some moments, she suffered from keen self-reproaches. But, an accusing spirit quickly obliterated this impression. In her heart she wrote many bitter things against her husband, and magnified habits and peculiarities into serious faults.

Poor, unhappy wife! How little did she comprehend the fact that her husband's feet were near the brink of a precipice, and that a fearful abyss of ruin was below; else would she have drawn him lovingly back, instead of driving him onward to destruction.

CHAPTER V

ELLIS, excited and angry, not only left his wife's presence, but the house. Repulsed by one pole, he felt the quick attraction of another. Not a moment did he hesitate, on gaining the street, but turned his steps toward the room of Jerome, where a party of gay young men were to assemble for purposes of conviviality.

We will not follow him thither, nor describe the manner of his reception. We will not picture the scene of revelry, nor record the coarse jests that some of the less thoughtful of the company ventured to make on the appearance of Ellis in their midst—for, to most of his friends, it was no secret that his wife's uncertain temper often caused him to leave his home in search of more congenial companionship. Enough, that at eleven o'clock, Ellis left the house of Jerome, much excited by drink.

The pure, cool night air, as it bathed the heated temples of Henry Ellis, so far sobered him by the time he reached his own door, that a distant remembrance of what had occurred early in the evening was present to his thoughts; and, still beyond this, a remembrance of how he had been received on returning at a late hour in times gone by. His hand was in his pocket, in search of his dead-latch key, when he suddenly retreated from the door, muttering to himself—

"I'm not going to stand a curtain lecture! There now! I'll wait until she's asleep."

Saying which, he drew a cigar and match-box from his pocket, and lighting the former, placed it between his lips, and moved leisurely down the street.

The meeting with Wilkinson has already been described.

Scarcely less startled was Ellis at the sudden apparition of Mrs. Wilkinson than her husband had been. He remained only a few moments after they retired. Then he turned his steps again homeward, with a clearer head and heavier heart than when he refused to enter, in fear of what he called a "curtain lecture."

Many painful thoughts flitted through his mind as he moved along with a quick pace.

"I wish Cara understood me better, or that I had more patience with her," he said to himself. "This getting angry with her, and going off to drinking parties and taverns is a bad remedy for the evil, I will confess. It is wrong in me, I know. Very wrong. But I can't bear to be snapped, and snubbed up, and lectured in season and out of season. I'm only flesh and blood. Oh dear! I'm afraid evil will come of it in the end. Poor Wilkinson! What a shock the appearance of his wife must have given him! It set every nerve in my body to quivering. And it was all my fault that he wasn't at home with his watching wife and sick child. Ah me! How one wrong follows another!"

Ellis had reached his own door. Taking out his night-key, he applied it to the latch; but the door did not open. It had been locked.

"Locked out, ha!" he ejaculated quickly; and with a feeling of anger. His hand was instantly on the bell-pull, and he jerked it three or four times vigorously; the loud and continued ringing of the bell sounding in his ears where he stood on the doorstep without. A little while he waited, and then the ringing was renewed, and with a more prolonged violence than at first. Then he listened, bending his ear close to the door. But he could detect no movement in the house.

"Confound it!" came sharp and impatiently from his lips. "If I thought this was designed, I'd—"

He checked himself, for just at that instant he saw a faint glimmer of light through the glass over the door. Then he perceived the distant shuffle of feet along the passage floor. There was a fumbling at the key and bolts, and then the half-asleep and half-awake servant admitted him.

"I didn't know you was out, sir," said the servant, "or I wouldn't have locked the door when I went to bed."

Ellis made no reply, but entered and ascended to his chamber. Cara was in bed and asleep, or apparently so. Her husband did not fail to observe a certain unsteady motion of the lashes that lay over her closed eyes; and he was not far wrong in his impression that she was awake, and had heard

his repeated ringing for admission. His belief that such was the case did not lessen the angry feelings produced by the fact of having the key of his own door turned upon him.

But slumber soon locked his senses into oblivion, and he did not awake until the sun was an hour above the horizon.

The moment Mrs. Wilkinson emerged, with her husband, from the bar-room of Parker's tavern, she fled along the street like a swift gliding spirit, far outstripping in speed her thoroughly sobered and alarmed husband, who hurried after her with rapid steps. The door of the house had been left open when she came forth in the anguish of her wild alarm to summon her husband, and she re-entered and flew up-stairs without the pause of an instant. Wilkinson was but a moment or two later in reaching the house, and in gaining their chamber. The sight that met his eyes sent the blood coldly to his heart. The mother had already snatched the child from the crib in which she had left her, and was standing with her close to the lamp, the light from which fell strongly upon her infantile face, that was fearfully distorted. The eyes were open and rolled up, until the entire pupil was hidden. The lips were white with their firm compression; and yet they had a quick nervous motion.

"Oh, John! John! what is the matter?" cried Mrs. Wilkinson, as she looked first upon the face of her child, and then into that of her husband, with a most anxious and imploring glance. "Is she dying?"

"No, dear, I think not," returned Wilkinson, with a composure of voice that belied the agitation of his feelings.

"Oh! what is the matter? Yes! Yes! I'm sure she's dying. Oh! run quick! quick! for the doctor."

"First," said Wilkinson, who was becoming, every moment, more self-possessed, and who now saw that the child, who was teething, had been thrown into spasms, "let us do what we can for her. She is in convulsions, and we must get her into a bath of hot water as quickly as possible. I will call up Anna. Don't be alarmed," he added, in a soothing voice: "there is no immediate danger."

"Are you sure, John? Are you sure? Oh! I'm afraid she is dying! My precious, precious babe!" And the mother clasped her child passionately to her bosom.

In the course of ten or fifteen minutes, a vessel of hot water was ready, and into this the still writhing form of the convulsed child was placed. Then Wilkinson hurried off for their physician. Half an hour afterwards he returned with him. The good effects of the hot-bath were already perceptible. The face of the child had resumed its placid sweetness of expression, and there was but slight convulsive twitching in the limbs. The doctor remained with them, applying, from time to time, appropriate remedies, until all the painful signs which occasioned so much alarm had vanished, and then left, promising to call early on the next morning.

It was past one o'clock. The physician had left, and the domestics retired to their own apartment. Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson were alone with their still unconscious child, that lay in a deep, unnatural slumber. They were standing, side by side, and bending over the bed on which little Ella lay. Wilkinson had drawn his arm around his wife, and she had laid her head upon his shoulder. Each heard the beating of the other's heart, as thus they stood, silent, yet with troubled thoughts and oppressed feelings.

A tear fell upon the hand of Wilkinson, and the warm touch, coming as it did in that moment of intense excitement, caused a quick thrill to pass through his nerves; and he started involuntarily. Words of confession and promises for the future were on his tongue; but, their utterance, just at that moment, seemed untimely, and he merely answered the mute appeal of tears with a fervent, heart-warm kiss, that, if the power of his will could have gone with it, would have filled the heart of his wife with joy unspeakable. Scarcely had his lips touched hers, ere she started up, and flung her arms around his neck, sobbing—

"Oh, my husband! My husband!"

If she had designed to say more, utterance failed, or was checked; for she hid her face on his bosom, and wept like a heart-broken child.

How sincere was Wilkinson's repentance for past errors in that solemn hour! and how fervent was the promise of future amendment!

"I were worse than an evil spirit, to lay grief upon that gentle heart, or to make of those loving eyes a fountain of tears!"

Such was the mental ejaculation of Wilkinson, and he meant all that he said.

"God bless you, dearest!" he murmured in her ear.—"God bless you, and take this shadow quickly from your heart! Believe me, Mary, that no act of mine will ever dim its bright surface again."

Mrs. Wilkinson slowly raised her pale, tear-moistened face, and fixed, for a few moments, her eyes in those of her husband's. There was more of confidence and hope in them than pages of written language could express. Then her face was again hid on his bosom; while his arm clasped her slender form with a more earnest pressure.

CHAPTER VI

MORNING found little Ella, though much exhausted by the severe struggle through which she had passed, so far restored that her parents ceased to feel that anxiety with which for hours, as they hung over her, their hearts had been painfully oppressed.

It could not but be that a shadow would rest on the gentle face of Mrs. Wilkinson, as she met her husband at the breakfast table; for it was impossible to obliterate the memory of such a night of trial and alarm as the one through which she had just passed. And yet, with a strong effort, she strove to appear cheerful, and when she spoke to her husband, it was with a forced smile and a tone of tenderness that touched and subdued his feelings; for he well understood that, in a certain sense, she was merely acting.

But few words passed between them during the brief morning meal. As the hour was later than usual, Wilkinson found it necessary to hurry off to his place of business; so, rising before his wife left the table, he kissed her pale lips, and, without venturing to make a remark, left the room.

The door had scarcely closed upon him, ere a tear stole out from the sad eyes of Mrs. Wilkinson. A few moments she sat in statue-like stillness, then there was a quick glancing of her eye upwards, while the motion of her lips showed that she asked strength for herself, or protection for one whom she loved better than herself.

It was a regular custom with Wilkinson to stop at a drinking-house on his way to his store, and get a glass of brandy. This was an afternoon as well as a morning custom, which had been continued so long that it was now a habit. Yet he was not aware of this fact, and, if he had thought about the custom, would have regarded it as one easily abandoned. He had a glimpse of his error on the present occasion.

To do a thing by habit is to do it without reflection; and herein lies the dangerous power of habit; for, when we act from confirmed habit, it is without thought as to the good or evil to result from our action. Thus had Wilkinson been acting for months as regards his regular glass of brandy in the morning and afternoon, while passing from his dwelling to his store. Not until now was he in the least conscious that habit was gaining an undue power over him.

As the eyes of Wilkinson rested upon the form of a certain elegant coloured glass lamp standing in front of a well-known drinking-house, he was conscious of a desire for his accustomed draught of brandy and water; but, at the same instant, there came a remembrance of the painful occurrences of the evening previous, and he said to himself—"One such lesson ought to make me hate brandy, and every thing else that can rob me of a true regard for the happiness of Mary."

Yet, even as he said this, habit, disturbed in the stronghold of its power, aroused itself, and furnished him with an argument that instantly broke down his forming resolution. This argument was his loss of rest, the consequent debility arising therefrom, and the actual need of his system for something stimulating, in order to enable him to enter properly upon the business of the day.

So habit triumphed. Wilkinson, without even pausing at the door, entered the drinking-house and obtained his accustomed glass of brandy.

"I feel a hundred per cent. better," said he, as he emerged from the bar-room and took his way to his store. "That was just what my system wanted."

Yet, if he felt, for a little while, better as regarded his bodily sensations, the act did not leave him more comfortable in mind. His instinctive consciousness of having done wrong in yielding to the desire for brandy, troubled him.

"I shall have to break up this habit entirely," he remarked to himself during the morning, as his thought returned, again and again, to the subject. "I don't believe I'm in any particular danger; but, then, it troubles Mary; and I can't bear to see her troubled."

While he thus communed with himself, his friend Ellis dropped in.

"I meant to have called earlier," said Ellis, "to ask about your sick child, but was prevented by a customer. She is better, I hope?"

"Oh, yes, much better, thank you."

"What was the matter?" inquired Ellis.

"She is teething, and was thrown into convulsions."

"Ah! yes. Well, I never was so startled in my life as by the appearance of Mrs. Wilkinson. And the child is better?"

"When I came away this morning, I left her sleeping calmly and sweetly; and, what is more, the points of two teeth had made their way through the red and swollen gums."

"All right, then. But how is Mary?"

"Not very well, of course. How could she be, after such a night of anxiety and alarm? The fact is, Harry, I was to blame for having left her alone during the evening, knowing, as I did, that Ella was not very well."

Ellis shrugged his shoulders, as he replied—"Not much excuse for you, I must admit. I only wish the attraction at my home was as strong as it is at yours: Parker's would not see me often. As for you, my old friend, if I speak what I think, I must say that your inclination to go out in the evening needs correcting. I spend most of my evenings from home, because home is made unpleasant; you leave your wife, because a love of conviviality and gay company entices you away. Such company I know to be dangerous, and especially so for you. There now, as a friend, I have talked out plainly. What do you think of it? Ain't I right?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.