

HER SISTERS' LIBRARY.

A Tale of English Life.

By Walter Besant.

CHAPTER I.

On a fine Saturday evening in July there are never more readers at the Free Library. The old men who come in winter, because the place is warm and light and quiet, are now walking up and down the pavement, where the sunshine warms them through and through and chases away their rheumatic pains. The younger men are all abroad, playing cricket, boating, cycling, rambling about, thinking of nothing but the delights of fresh air, and rejoicing in their youth. What have the young to do with a dusty, dusky library on a summer evening? A library is a cemetery. Books are mostly the tombs of dead men's brains. Young folk are much better occupied with reading each other's thoughts than with walking among the tombs, so that the library is almost empty.

It was about seven o'clock. At the window into which the sun would have poured its wealth of heat and light which it gives to the tombs of the dead as well as to the living, a blind was hauled down, leaving a long, narrow line. The sun, peering in its attempt to reach everything, took advantage of the line to make a thin plate of lamina of bright sunshine, across which the merry notes danced with their usual cheerful tunes. There was a smell of leather bindings; the tables were covered with magazines and papers; a few readers sat at the tables. But I think that knowledge was not greatly advanced. One or two of them slept; one or two looked as if they thought were elsewhere—with the book babbling over the shallows, with the village cronies gathered under the lean-to beside the ale-house. One of them, gaunt, hollow-eyed, hungry, sat with an illustrated paper before him. But he never turned over a leaf, and he looked not at the pictures. The librarian watched that man suspiciously. He did not like the look in that man's eyes. It meant rebellion; it meant a wicked spirit of discontent with the social order which left him starving while it made his neighbor fat, and refused him work while it suffered his neighbor to live in comfort on the work of other men. Only a year or two ago—or it might be ten, because to one who is a librarian years have no significance in connection with numbers—a man had come into the place with just such a look in his eyes. That man asked for a book, sat down, and proceeded to tear away its bindings and to wrench its sheets asunder. Then he gave himself up to the librarian with the greatest gentleness and politeness, explaining that liberty without a crust was really a mockery, and that in future he meant to be maintained by his country, and that when he had served his time for the destruction of the book, he meant to smash a lamp, and that atoned for, to steal a stretcher from a police station, and so on, getting perhaps longer sentences, until he could be called to his reward. They walked off together to the nearest police station like two old friends, and parted with hearty grips after the sergeant had noted the case.

Another man there was whom the librarian regarded with eyes of compassion. He dragged himself slowly and wearily up the stairs, threw himself upon a seat next the wall, and there, provided with a book, took up a paper, signed, and instantly fell fast asleep. This sort the librarian knew very well—he was the clerk out of work.

He felt as if he were exhausted with want of food, and with climbing the stairs in the city seeking for work. The librarian wondered how much longer the weary man would continue. The man was clearly well on the downward slope; his next place would be lower, his next lower still. With adversity arrives too often moral weakening; it is one of the countless ills which follow in misfortune's train; perhaps this poor wretch would take to drinking of them; in the end, a clean bed in the London hospital, with pneumonia drawing him swiftly to an ignominious grave.

The librarian sat in his corner, a many-pigeon-holed cabinet against the wall at his side, a great book before him—no librarian is complete without a great book before him—and the usual materials for cataloguing on his desk, because to carry on the catalogue is an necessary part of the daily work as to open the day's letters is for a secretary. He was a man of 60, or perhaps more, his beard white, and his grey hair scanty on the top. He wore spectacles, and his face showed the wrinkles, the rough surface of one who has never been concerned with markets, prices, or the state of trade. He lived all day in the library, and in the evening he walked home to his solitary lodging, two miles away.

The librarian of a free library is familiar with every kind of reader. He classifies them all. There are first the unemployed, the most numerous patrons of the free library. The librarian gets to know the trade of every man, if he belongs to one of the commoner branches of work, by his appearance. There are the quiet men who use the library in the evening, when their mates are in the public-house drinking, or at the club wrangling or perhaps gambling. They come here not to pursue a line of study, but to amuse themselves in peace. Then in any library there are one or two industrious of the day-time. Mostly they are retired tradesmen, or old pensioners

who continue to live in the locality where they have friends. There is the pensioner who comes regularly to consult all the papers on sporting matters. He collects the prophetic tips, and notes the odds in a book; he would fain be a Sharp, but he, too often, remains a Juggins. There is the boy who comes here to read the news, and to sit in a corner and dream away the time deliciously over a story. There is the poor country lad who has more knowledge in his little finger than a London artisan in his whole body, who understands how to plow and to reap, and stack and thrash; who can cultivate an allotment; who knows sheep and beasts, and pigs and horses; who can foretell the weather. Yet he has thrown it all over and come up to London, where he has nothing but his pair of hands and his strong arms, and his great knowledge avails him nothing. 'Tis as if you turned a professor of mathematics into a draper's shop, where they would use him for nothing but to sweep the floor and carry out the parcels. He rolls up to the library accidentally, and not liking the place or the smell (which is not in the least like the smell of the earth), he goes out again.

The librarian knows them all. He watches the silent room as the clock over his head ticks away and ticks up their little stories for them. Sometimes they whisper a little with him. He is a sympathetic creature and they will confide their case to him asking for his advice. They do not seek it in the same way as they do in the city, for work. And sometimes he knows, or has heard things, which may help them. Other librarians, you see, get a vast and intimate acquaintance with books. This librarian is more useful to his readers if he knows the contents of the trade journals. Sometimes, however, as in the case of Naomi Hellyer, he was altogether at sea. Naomi first appeared on this Saturday evening. She came in timidly, and looked about her with hesitation, and then she went to the shelves. There were things are not changed much. "Oh, give it to me—thank you!" She snatched it from him and sought her corner, where she sat, her head on her hand, reading the book all the evening.

They walked home together in silence, side by side.

streets, now growing cool in the July twilight. Presently he saw before him, going the same way, his reader. He overtook her and ventured to speak. "Are you going the same way?" he asked. "I am going to —," She mentioned a street not far off. "It is the same way," he replied; "may I walk with you? I am the librarian, you know."



Presently the librarian began to ask a few leading questions, and learned that his new friend was a workwoman at a dressmaker's in the neighborhood. It is not a fashionable quarter, and the pay given to the most superior person is but meager—still it was enough, and the work was regular. "I do not belong to the place," she said, "I come from the country. I have no friends, and am fortunate in getting any work at all."

"You must come a great deal to the library," he replied. "There you can be quiet and have the companionship of books, if you care for them. But you must not always read sad books."

"I have no heart," she said, "for anything but sad books. This is my street. Good-night." A week later she came again. Always on a Saturday evening. The reason was that she worked extra time in order to get a little more money on other evenings. "I have found you a book about female convicts," the librarian told her. "It is twenty years old, but I suppose things are not changed much."

"Oh, give it to me—thank you!" She snatched it from him and sought her corner, where she sat, her head on her hand, reading the book all the evening. They walked home together again. "You are in great trouble," said the librarian. "If it will be any help to you, tell me what it is. A good many people tell me their troubles. Sometimes it helps me only to talk about things. Have you any friends?"

"No, I have lost all my old friends, and I cannot make new ones. Oh, if I could tell you —," "You may tell me, if you will trust me."

"You will not give me any more books if I do."

"Surely—surely —," "Well then—the reason why I want to read about—about—you know—oh! I must speak to someone—the reason why—it is because my sister is in prison—oh! my sister—oh! my poor, poor sister! She is in prison."

CHAPTER II. BY THE RIVER.

gloomy day. A fresh breeze blew up the river, whirling the leaves off the trees, whirling them about in the air and making drifting heaps of them; the branches overhead croaked; the meadows were dark; the river was black; drops of rain fell upon the faces of the pair who walked side by side, the young man's arm around the girl's waist.

"Tell me all," he said. "Let me know the worst, and then we can face it. My darling, is there anything that we cannot face together—hand-in-hand?" "Oh!" she murmured. "It puts new strength in me—only to hear you speak and to feel your presence. Naomi is anxious and troubles herself about the future, morning, noon and night. Harry, will it make no difference to you?"

"My darling, how would anything make a difference to me? Do I not love you once for all—for all this world and all the next?" "He bent over her—she was tall and girlish young fellow—and she raised her face to meet his lips. "He fell down," she went on, "while John was putting up the shutters. He was standing at his desk, and he fell down on his face. He never spoke again or knew anybody or felt anything. And next morning about noon he died."

"He died," echoed the lover. "Poor dear Ruth! You told me of this in your letter. It was a terrible blow to you." "I wrote to you about it. But I said nothing of what was discovered afterward."

"What was discovered?" "We always thought he was so well off. Everybody thought so. There was never any want of money. When he died the people who must remember how well off we should be left, and that ought to console us."

"Well, dear," "There is nothing. The business had been falling off for years. There is not a penny left to pay rent and taxes. And as for what is left it must all go to pay debts."

"Poor child! This is terrible. What will you do?" "I have found you a book about female convicts," the librarian told her. "It is twenty years old, but I suppose things are not changed much."

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"You will not give me any more books if I do."

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