

The Words of a Little Child

By Richard Marsh

I. THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

A dirty room, with, in it, a ricketty table, a wooden chair without a back, an empty sugar box, used as a stool, and in a corner on the floor a heterogeneous collection of odds and ends, which served as a bed. Very little else, except a woman, a little girl, a black bottle, and a cup without a handle. To the woman the black bottle was far and away the most prominent object in the room. All that, in her judgment, was needed to adequately furnish a room was a bottle of gin. And there was still the better part of a pint of gin in that black bottle. She was making it last as long as she could.

The woman sat on the chair without a back, and the little girl on the empty sugar box in front of her. And the woman took sips from the cup without a handle, and she groaned: "Your father's a wicked man; he's a devil."

"Yes," said the child. She spoke in a shrill, clear treble. She was only seven, though her form was wizened, and her whole being was saturated with sin. "He's a devil."

"No one knows what your poor mother has had to bear from that father of yours.

"He's always a-beating of you."

"It's gawd's truth, my lovey."

"An' now he's a-going to kill yer."

"That he is."

"But I'll 'ang 'im for it, mother."

"That's a good girl to the mother what loves yer." The woman wiped her bleary eyes with a corner of her filthy rag of an apron. She took another sip from the cup; she looked at the child with the cunning grin of the woman who has lived for years practically on nothing but gin. "You've been a good daughter to your poor mother, and I've been a good mother to you, haven't I, Louisa?"

"A better mother never was!"

Suddenly the woman looked over the child's head. She pointed with quavering finger towards a corner of the room; she trembled with excitement.

"There's another of them, Louisa, there s another! A great black thing, with long 'air and a bushy tail, I see it drop from the ceiling. Look alive, girl, move yourself; don't let it get at me!"

The girl moved herself. Going to the spot indicated she went through the pantomime of stamping on, and kicking at, nothing at all. In a child of such tender years the gravity with which she did it was, in its way, sublime.

"That's all right, mother, I done for it."

Her mother began to cry.

"Whatever I should have done without you, Louisa, I don't know. You've been a blessing to your poor mother. Take another sup, my girl, only don't you take too much, 'cause there's only a little left in the bottle, and it's the last drop of comfort your poor mother'll have in this world."

And the woman wept profusely. The child took a sip from the contents of the cup. When she had drunk she mimicked the action of a cat—she put out her tongue and she licked her lips.

“Mind you ’ang your father, girl!” Mrs. Drewett, leaning her elbows on the table, shook her fist at the child. “If you don’t ’ang your father, Louisa, I’ll come back, and I’ll ’aunt yer by day, and by night, and I’ll never leave yer.”

“I’ll be sure to ’ang ’im, mother.”

“What shall you say to the peeler as comes and finds me?”

“ ‘Oh, my poor mother! oh, my poor mother!’ ”

The child sprang off the sugar box, and she held her clasped hands up in front of her, and there were not only tears in her voice, there were tears in her eyes. As a piece of realistic acting, suggesting the agony of a child’s heart-broken grief, it was perfect.

“And what shall you say to the kind gentleman as asks you ’ow I come to die?”

“ ‘ If you please, sir’ ”—the child dropped a curtsey—“father come into the room, and he locks the door, and ’e says to mother, “I’m going to do for you, you —. I’ve often said I would, and now I will.” And mother says, “Oh, Bill, you wouldn’t kill me!” And father says, “I would, by —! There’s another woman I likes better than you, and she won’t ’ave me unless I puts you away, so I’m going to do it.” Then father takes something out of his pocket in a paper, and he puts it into a cup, and he puts some gin out of mother’s bottle, and he holds the cup out to mother, and he says, “You drink this.” And mother says, “Oh, Bill, you wouldn’t poison me!” And father takes hold of mother and he drags her on to the ground, and he hits her in the face, and he takes ’er head on ’is arm, and he says. “Drink this, you —!” If you please, sir, I didn’t see if mother drank it, father was ’tween me and ’er.’ ”

The child dropped another curtsey.

“And then the kind gentleman will say, ‘What happened then, my little girl?’ ”

The prompting was from the mother; the child went on— “ ‘If you please, sir, mother begins coughing, sir, and she says, “What was it, Bill?”’ ”

“And father says, ‘You would spit it out, you —, would you?’ And he takes a knife out of his pocket, and he sticks it into mother’s stomach. Oh, mother! mother! mother!”

The child put her hands up to her eyes, as if to veil from them some dreadful spectacle, and burst into an agony of childish lamentation, which would have melted the heart of a stoic. Her mother nodded approbation—approbation which was, in at least one sense, well merited.

“And if the kind gentleman asks you if ever you heard your father threaten to kill me, what shall you say then?”

“ ‘If you please, sir’ ”—another curtsey—“ ‘he was always a saying as ow ’e do for ’er, and mother, she used to say to me, that, one of these days, she knew as ’ow ’e would kill ’er, too.’ ”

Another burst of lamentation, a little more modified than before—artistically. Mrs. Drewett had sat, nursing her leg, rocking herself backwards and forwards on the chair, watching the performance with critical satisfaction. It deserved watching. As a performance it would have done credit to what is often described, oddly enough, as the “regular” stage.

“That’s right, Louisa, don’t you overdo it. Not pitching it too strong, but just strong enough, is everythink. I never see nothing like you, Louisa, so quick, and so clever, and so good to your poor mother. We’ll ’ang your father, you an’ me between us—only mind you don’t forget a morsel of what I’ve taught you.”

“Not a morsel, mother. Don’t you fear. I’ll ’ang ’im, safe as ’ouses!”

“I don’t fear—I trust you, my lovey. You ’ave another drop, along o’ me, my girl.”

Mrs. Drewett tilted some more of the contents of the bottle into the cup. She had a good drink herself, The dregs she left for the child. The child enjoyed them. The mother took something, screwed up in a piece of paper, from the pocket of her dress.

“This is poison, my lovey—certain death. It’s what your father’s going to kill me with.” She giggled, tipsily. “And this is a knife what I kep’ back from that last lot of tools of ’is I pawned—the knife’ll be enough to ’ang ’im. We’ll tie ’im up atween us, you an me, and we’ll do the trick as soon as ’e comes ’ome.”

The mother and the child sat drinking together, waiting and watching for the return of the husband and the father.

II. THE FATHER

“Hollo, William, what are you doing here? You’re looking down in the mouth.” The speaker was Mr. Thomas Dunn. Mr. Drewett drew himself away from the wall, against which he was leaning, and looked at him. Mr. Drewett was a big, hairy man, slow to think, and, as a rule, also slow to speak. A stupid, blundering sort of fellow, who always seemed to need an effort at recollection to enable him to decide exactly where he was.

“I’m a thinking of how to kill someone. That’s what I’m a doing of.”

Mr. Dunn looked him up and down. Mr. Dunn knew his friend, and he saw that the man was troubled.

“If I was you I wouldn’t think of nothing of the kind. That sort of thinking don’t do anyone no good. What’s up now, William?”

“You know that there lot of tools you chaps gived me?—she’s pawned ’em.”

“No!”

“She ’ave.”

“I thought you said you wasn’t going to take ’em home.”

“More I didn’t—leastways, not quite ’ome. I ’id ’em on top of a old cupboard, what’s outside our door. She must ’ave ’eard me putting ’em away. Leastways, when I got up, they was gone, and ’er with ’em. As I come along the Street I met ’er coming out o’ Spratt’s. She had the ticket in ’er and, and the money for my tools in ’er—pocket. I felt like killin’ of ’er then. Only she set up such a screechin’ all the people came a-hinterfering.”

“She’s a beauty!”

“I’ll kill ’er yet. She’s done for me, and now I’ll do for ’er—for good and all.”

“Don’t you go talking like that—it ain’t like you at all, William. You come in and have a pint with me. That’ll liven you up—you wants livening.”

They turned into the bar. There Mr. Drewett had a pint with Mr. Dunn. And there Mr. Drewett met another friend. When Mr. Dunn went off to his work Mr. Drewett, having no work to go to, and no tools to do it with if he had, stayed behind with this other friend, and had a pint with him. The liquor having loosened his tongue, he held forth on the subject of his grievances to the loungers in the bar. The recital so touched the hearts of his listeners that they sought to solace his afflictions with other “drains” of beer. The result of which was that he said things which he did not mean to say, and which he did not mean when he had said them, and which he never would have said had he retained possession of his sober senses. When a man, who is generally insufficiently fed, has fasted through the day, and who, besides, is nearly maddened by domestic troubles—when this man drinks a pint or two of four-ale, it affects him much more than it would an habitual drunkard.

As Mr. Dunn, returning homewards from his work, glanced in at the door, he found Mr. Drewett still where he had left him. Only the man was changed. He was leaning against a corner of the bar, his hands in his breeches pockets, his cap on the back of his head, muttering, over and

over again, "I'll kill her! I'll kill her!" as if it was a lesson which he had learnt by heart. He was stupid with drink.

Mr. Dunn made short work of him. He went right into the bar, and he caught him by the arm.

"William, I'm ashamed of you. What's the good of your going on at your old woman if you yourself goes on like this? You just come straight home 'long o' me.

Mr. Drewett consented to be led home, docile as a child. The beer which he had drunk, taking effect upon an empty stomach, had acted as a narcotic; he seemed stupefied, more than half asleep. His brain, never remarkable for perspicuity, was in such a state of fuddle that, as he himself declared afterwards, he had no clear idea of what was really happening. To him, all that took place seemed to take place in the confusion of a dream.

Mr. Dunn piloted him to the door of the house which contained what Mr. Drewett called his home. There he left him. As Mr. Dunn pursued his solitary way he commented to himself—"She'll drive him to drink, that'll be the end of it. She's a nice wife for a man to have. A sound flogging or two would do her good. If I had my way she'd get 'em."

Meanwhile, Mr. Drewett, in a condition of desperate muddle, was staggering and floundering up the staircase to his "home."

III. THE UNITED FAMILY

The woman was standing up, supporting herself, as best she could, upon her tottering legs, pointing, with both of her trembling hands outstretched, at the creatures which were born of her delirium. She shrank farther and farther away.

"There's lots of 'em, Louisa. There's one just jumped down upon your 'and. There's another creeping through a crack in the wall, ah—h!" she screeched. "They're a-coming at me! don't yer let 'em touch me! don't yer!"

The child hopped about like one possessed, straining every nerve to ward off from her mother the things which were not there, and all the time so serious—such a mistress of make-believe.

"All right, mother; I won't let 'em touch yer—don't yer be afraid!"

The woman's mood was changed. She crouched, her hand raised above her head, in an attitude of eager attention. She was listening.

"'Ush!" The child was still. "There's someone comin' up the stairs! It's him!—it's your father! Move yourself, my girl!"

She herself moved quickly to the table. She turned the contents of the paper packet, which still lay on the table, into the cup which was without a handle; she diluted it with gin from the black bottle, stirring the mixture with her finger. She was in a tremor of excitement.

"I'm a-going to 'ang 'im! I'm a-going to 'ang 'im! If I am to kill myself, I'll 'ang 'im, so 'elp me gawd, I will!" She shook her fist at the child. "And you, Louisa, your mother's a-going to kill 'erself to 'ang your father, and if you forgets a morsel of what I've learned yer, I'll come back from my grave to 'aunt yer!"

The child's eyes glistened. Unlike her mother, she was not excited. But it was obvious that she was interested.

"I won't forget a morsel. I'll 'ang 'im, mother; I swear to gawd I will!"

The woman held up in front of her the cup which contained the mixture.

"There's enough there to kill twenty women. I know what's what, though there's some as doesn't think it—let alone a poor broken-down old thing like me. It'll snuff me out just like a candle; that it will!" Her voice rose to a scream. "Curse 'im, I 'ate 'im! I 'ate 'im! and I allays

'ave. 'E wanted to keep me from the drink, though 'e knowed it was the only comfort what I 'ad, and now I'll 'ang 'im and I'll be even with the —!"

The sentence was finished in a whirlwind of execrations. Someone was heard floundering about outside the door. The woman lowered her voice.

"There he is! Now, Louisa, mind you don't forget."

The child replied in a whisper, "I won't forget, mother."

"Now you're going to see some fun—'ollo!" Someone outside lurched against the door. "Sounds as if 'e 'd been 'aving a drop 'isself. That'll make it all the easier— 'e never could carry 'is liquor like a man, and they allays 'angs a bloke what murders 'is wife when 'e's in drink." She giggled. The handle of the door was grasped from without. "Louisa, as soon as 'e's inside, you move yourself and turn the key; it'll make it look wuss for 'im—now don't you forget!"

"No, mother, I won't forget."

The door was opened, with sufficient awkwardness, to admit Mr. Drewett. So soon as he was in, the child, with impish quickness, snatching the door from his unsteady grasp, shut it with a bang and turned the key. He, evidently not comprehending the manœuvre, lurched backwards against the wall. Having gained its friendly support, against the wall he stayed. The husband and the wife eyed each other—or, rather, the woman eyed her husband, while he, so to speak, endeavoured to obtain her focus. Mr. Drewett was not in a condition to see anything plainly.

The woman giggled, holding all the while the cup in her hand.

"So you're going to kill me, are you?"

"Yes," Mr. Drewett hiccupped; "I'm going to kill you."

"Oh, you are, are you? You 'ear what yer father says, Louisa? You mark 'is words."

"Yes, mother, I won't forget."

It was strange how quietly absorbed the child appeared to be, with all her faculties keenly alert—like an intelligent child listening to an absorbing story.

"Are yer going to kill me for another woman what yer likes better than me, are yer?"

"Yes"—another hiccup—"I'm going to kill yer."

The woman giggled again.

"You 'ear what yer father says, my girl? 'E's a-going to kill yer poor mother 'long of another woman what he likes better nor 'er. Are you a-listenin', Louisa?"

"Yes, mother, I'm a-listenin'."

"Well, my bloke, there's enough poison in that cup to kill twenty women, let alone one. Are yer goin' to make me drink it?"

"Yes." There was a repetition of the hiccup and of the monotonous refrain. "I'm going to kill yer."

"There yer are, then, make me drink it."

The woman held out the cup to the man with a leer. He took it, but, obviously mistaking the intention with which it had been proffered, advanced it towards his own lips. She snatched it from him with an oath. In doing so some of the contents was spilt. This inflaming her to wrath, she struck him savagely across the face. He merely looked at her with a fuddled stare.

"You —!" With the cup held once more in her own hand she suddenly broke into a series of ear-splitting yells, "'Elp! 'elp! 'elp! 'E's a-murdering me! 'E's a-killing me! 'Elp! 'elp! Mur-r-der-r-r!"

As if the noise which the woman made was not sufficient to awake the dead, the instant she slackened, the child burst into shrill childish lamentations.

"Oh, my poor mother! oh, my poor mother! Father's killin' my poor mother!"

When she paused the woman giggled. She had the cup close to her lips. She whispered—

“Now, Louisa, mind you don’t forget!”

“No, mother, I won’t forget.”

“Good-bye, my girl!”

Draining, as she spoke, the contents of the cup to the dregs, she threw the cup from her so that it shivered into fragments on the floor, setting up, at the same time, a hullabaloo such as one might have thought no single pair of human lungs would have been capable of. Although it was impossible for him to avoid hearing her, it was plain that Mr. Drewett had not the faintest notion what the bother was about. As he was looking at her with hazy eyes, his wife leapt at him like a tiger-cat.

“‘Elp! ‘elp! ‘elp!” she screamed. “‘E’s killin’ me! My gawd! Mur-der!”

The child, rushing to the window, threw it open, and, leaning out into the street, caught up her mother’s cry— “Oh, my poor mother! Father’s killin’ mother!”

The woman bit and scratched and struck and kicked the man, and clutched at his hair, and sought to tear his clothes from off him, until even Mr. Drewett was roused from his heavy stupor, and began, in grim earnest, to struggle with her. Hither and thither they went, from side to side of the room. Coming within reach of the knife which lay upon the table, the woman snatched it up, sending the table crashing to the floor as she did so.

“He’s stabbin’ me! he’s stabbin’ me!” she screamed.

The child passed the cry on into the street.

“Oh, my poor mother! Father’s stabbin’ my mother!”

The woman plunged the knife into her own bosom, cutting herself with it wherever she could.

IV. THE ORPHAN

When the door was broken open, and the crowd came streaming into the room, they found the woman in what was afterwards described as “a pool of blood,” on the floor, with her husband’s knife lying at her side. Mr. Drewett was standing near her, himself all drabbled with blood, his clothing in disorder, looking distraught and wild enough to have been guilty of a dozen murders. Apart from the wounds which she had received from the knife, the woman was convulsed with agony; the “mixture” was beginning already to take effect.

As the constable forced his way through the excited people, the child ran to him, her small clasped hands held up in front of her.

“Oh, my poor mother, sir! Father’s killed my mother!”

She cried as if her little heart would break. Women cried themselves as they heard her. There and then William Drewett was haled, handcuffed, off to gaol.

Before night Mrs. Drewett was dead. As she herself had said, she had taken enough of the “mixture” to kill twenty women. Acting on such a constitution as hers, its effect was even unusually rapid. She gave testimony against her husband before the end. In what was almost her last convulsive agony, she called her daughter to her side. The child leaned over her. The mother gasped out a last maternal injunction— “Louisa—mind—you—’ang—yer— father.”

The child whispered words of comfort to her mother’s soul.

“Don’t you fear, mother; I’ll ‘ang ‘im, safe as ‘ouses.” And Louisa did.

When William Drewett was standing his trial for the murder of his wife, the judge remarked, in the course of his summing-up:—

“There are three pieces of evidence to which it is my duty to especially direct your attention. First, there is the testimony of the witness, Thomas Dunn, on the question of premeditation; then there is the testimony of the dead woman herself, which she gave when she knew that she was dying—a moment when even the ordinarily most loose-speaking persons realise the responsibilities which may be attached to the words which they are using; and, in the third place, there is the testimony of the child, of the prisoner’s own daughter, Louisa. And, with reference to that evidence, I am bound to say that I cannot recall a case, within my own experience, of evidence being given, in a court of justice, by a child of such tender years, with greater clearness, which was more to the point, and which evinced a finer appreciation of the serious, and, indeed, in such a case as hers, the terrible responsibilities which are associated with the position of a witness. For my part, gentlemen of the jury, the evidence of the child—she is but the merest child—affected me strongly. And although in doing so I may seem to be travelling somewhat out of my province, I would express a hope that the case of the child, Louisa Drewett, may commend itself to the hearts of the charitable.”

It did. Louisa Drewett became quite a heroine. Her portrait was in all the illustrated papers; her name was on myriads of tongues. Her career, in the future, is likely to present features of peculiar interest. It had a beginning of such promise!

William Drewett was found guilty, and, after the usual delay, with all the form which the law prescribes, was hanged by the neck till he was dead.