

JACOB MEADOWS: OR, TOO LATE TO REPENT

BY EDWIN F. ROBERTS

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The pedestrian who may be accustomed to take walks occasionally of some six, eight, or ten miles from the city; who boldly stretches out beyond Stratford, Hackney, Highgate, Hampstead, Kingsland, Shepherd's Bush, or across water to Clapham, Streatham, or Sydenham, will observe vast level tracts of land in a state of the most perfect cultivation. There the sweet-pea blossoms, the dark green leaf of the potato relieves the monotony of the soil; and long rows of climbing leguminose, all in flower, lengthen more ambitiously; while the golden bloom of the laburnum, the dense thick foliage of the apple trees, from which all the starry beauties are fallen, but where, in their place, begin to cluster the delicious fruit of every hue and kind, all these heighten the fertile loveliness of the land. Along the ground runs the strawberry, with its luscious burthen nestling all ripe and ruddy beneath the leaves; in fact, the whole of these rural patches form most grateful pictures of cultivation, and fruitfulness, floral, and arboresque, that can possibly be met with in this or any other country.

Between Deptford and Greenwich might have been seen, some years ago, by the road-side, but almost hidden amidst laurels and ivy, an elegant and commodious cottage, with a number of long, rambling outhouses connected to it; and beyond that again were nursery grounds and endless glass-houses, where exotics of the rarest beauty and of great value bloomed. This house was inhabited by an industrious, clever man (in his profession) of the name of Jacob Meadows. He had a wife, two grown-up daughters, and a son of about fourteen years of age. Things were thriving with him after a hard struggle, and promised to go on for the rest of his life prosperously enough; and had the man trusted less in himself and more in the powers that Providence possesses of disposing things according to its own unerring wisdom, he might have been emphatically a happy man.

There was, however, in his temper a bitter leaven of morosity, which predisposed him to take things in that light most contrary to the actual state of the fact. His daughters were good-tempered, handsome, and sensible. His son was as industrious as his father, with, however, an inclination to start off at a tangent now and then, which, if it was not within the strict circle of morality, was more marked by a fondness for amusement than a tendency to vice. The mother, up early and down late, was one of those plodding, bustling housewives who are more than half the creators of their husband's success in the world. Clean to a fault, active, sharp of tongue, quick of eye, generous, yet saving, she for twenty years had been the willing, domestic slave of a man who never would be conciliated. A pattern to wives and mothers she was always full of bustle, and brought up her children as those of honest, hardy, country-fied (to use a common phrase) mothers alone can do.

From some unaccountable reason or other, supposed to originate, however, in the man's perverse nature, after so many years of industry and toil, his exertions became weakened; his attention to his business was not so close as formerly; but as his son, and three or four men whom he kept, attended to the gardens and the grounds as the daily routine, without his supervision went on as usual, no particular notice was taken of this; but still his presence was missed. Those who were accustomed to see him day by day about the place, were not now always certain of finding him: he was always busy "elsewhere;" he had gone "somewhere" on some important matter, and this occurring to the same parties repeatedly, convinced them that there was something wrong in the system of things. This grew more and more, and his occasionally being seen reeling along the road home towards nightfall, nay, during the daytime, confirmed the idea that Jacob Meadows was falling into strange courses incompatible with his age and station: he had become, in short, a confirmed tippler.

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When the family first became aware of this decisive and fatal change on the part of the father, the sensation that ran through them was that of absolute horror; it came upon them with the irresistible powers of some sudden catastrophe, some deadly calamity. His tipping propensity increased grew upon him; he became a drunkard. Day after day beheld him at the tavern, and there was a stern, hardy recklessness about his manner that, while it frightened the daughters and the mother, in one or two instances appalled the son.

If there was any one circumstance more than another to which this change may be attributed, it was this fact, namely, that the youngest daughter, Anne, a modest, laughing, nay, a charming girl, without affectation, or that excessive prudery which is generally a very questionable quality, appeared to look with eyes of favour upon a young man engaged in the grounds. He was little known, as he came from a distant part of the country; and as he was shy and reserved in his manners, their knowledge was but little extended, though he slept and boarded in the house.

Be that as it may, he was assiduous, industrious, and remarkably talented with regard to his business. His knowledge of botany, of trees, flowers, plants, in every branch was very great, and old Meadows, who began to grow more and more indolent, was glad to find any one in whom he could trust. As his own son was too young, Ralph Brown (which was the name of the youth), was by this time become the managing man of the establishment.

He was thus, in a manner, a member of the family, and in the evenings, while the mother and the daughters were engaged in needlework, or any other in-door occupation which drew them together, he had a fund of conversation wherewith to amuse them (after the ice of strangeness had been broken), or he would read to them those standard works whose healthy tone of morals go so far in the improvement and refinement of the mind.

But the frank manner of Jacob Meadows soon altered towards Ralph. First he grew distant, then morose; he took exceptions at everything, yet never gave the youth any other notice that his presence was disagreeable; in fact, he was grown too useful to be parted with. All this Ralph bore with great forbearance. He saw through the contrary nature of the man, and lamented that a naturally good disposition should be so far perverted as to make him a mere domestic tyrant. The old man thought he was being neglected at home; they thought it best to leave him alone, and say nothing to him. He thought his wife, his aged partner, was fantastic, fastidious, aping the lady a thing he abhorred. She, on the contrary, only thought that with better means they might, for his credit's sake, make a better show, though that indeed was little. He called his daughter's little bits of fancy-work, whether stitched or knitted, mere "fal-lals;" treated them with rough contempt; and all this harmless pastime grew at last detestable to him, though he did not directly say so, and only left them to wonder "what could have come over him;" so that a spirit of unhappiness began to spread itself among them.

Books, too, distracted their attention from him; so Jacob thought he was now become a secondary consideration. At the public-house he was a great man; but, as we are not detailing the life of a drunkard, we shall not enter into any specific account of his life in that quarter, but merely show how it worked upon him in his social relations. Seeing, then, that in the presence of Ralph the evenings were happy and passed away pleasantly, he thought it was an instance of coldness and negligence on their part, as his presence, half tipsy, or in a drunken stupor, seemed to be a clog upon them. He was, therefore, only the more annoyed.

Ralph was one night returning home from some business in the neighbourhood, when in the partial darkness he heard the tipsy voice of his master in a somewhat angry altercation with a female. The tones grew loud and recriminatory, and Ralph, almost to his horror, was aware of the downward course the old man was pursuing. Drunkenness had been succeeded by debauchery. He was disgracing his family and dishonouring his gray hairs; he was forgetting the solemn responsibility which rested upon him as a parent; and with a total disregard to all moral obligations had entered upon a career of vice which threatened to terminate in utter infamy and ruin.

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The sounds of discord grew louder; they were followed by actual violence, and the woman's shriek of "murder!" made Ralph instinctively spring forward to protect her; and he beheld his master grasping a gaudily-dressed female by the throat, and, with one hand lifted up, was about to strike her.

The youth instantly caught hold of Jacob's hand the blow was stayed; but in preventing violence for the present, Ralph won the hatred of the man beyond all limit and control. He was ferocious with him for being cognizant of a fact that, in his better moments, drove him into a gloom of despair; for his conscience smote him bitterly, and he felt the dishonour cling to him like a poisoned mantle which he could not tear off. He made little or no remark then, but parted from the female and walked doggedly home with Ralph, while Ralph himself, frightened by what he had witnessed, knew not what to say or do, the former difficulty, however, he resolved, by determining never to open his lips upon the subject.

Meantime, the tie which drew Anne and Ralph together strengthened. The very dangers which the sagacity of the young gardener foresaw, made him cleave all the more to the girl he now loved with all his heart and soul. This attachment was not unknown to the other members of the family. It met with the mother's unhesitating sanction. It was cordially admitted by the brother and the remaining sister; and Ralph, as if to counteract the increasing extravagance of Jacob Meadows by additional efforts, sought also to soothe the irritated spirits of the son, John Meadows, now between fourteen and fifteen years of age; for the old man's conduct grew more and more outrageous day by day. When time admitted of it, he sought to perfect him in several branches of a sound practical education; became his tutor in more senses than one, and was for a long while the only one whose imperturbability kept mischief and misery from crossing the threshold of that once happy home.

The old woman's heart was breaking. To see such a change come across the man she had loved that she had been bound to by so many dear ties for more than twenty years, was almost more than her warm, affectionate heart could bear; and the cheerful smile on her face, the bustling importance of her manner, gradually quitted her. She became tearful, depressed, and altogether such a picture of sadness that was heightened by her age into the profound melancholy of despair.

Ralph had reason to know that the disreputable acquaintance which the infatuated man had formed, was not likely to be broken off; and to make this portion of our story short, Jacob Meadows at last flung off all sense of shame, all assumption of decency. All the money he could gather was taken away, and the poor, old, neglected wife beheld herself abused, scorned, and utterly deserted. Everything was crumbling to ruin, when Ralph put his determination into effect he married Anne, and took a little cottage and grounds in the neighbourhood of Brixton, which soon began, under his industrious hand, to wear an air of thriving beauty that promised speedily to produce him some substantial return for his labour and outlay.

Previous to this, however, Jacob Meadows came home one night, far more than half tipsy. He was in no mood for contradiction, and in a temper to seek a quarrel and find fault with every one.

"Bring me some Brandy! do you hear?" he said in a hoarse, brutal voice to his broken-spirited wife.

"Oh! Jacob Jacob, don't don't!" cried the unhappy woman, wringing her hands.

"You used to love me once, Jacob, and to listen to me: for my sake for our children's sake don't"

"The brandy!" shouted the ma with an execration.

"For the love of heaven, do not!" implored the aged wife. "Think, dear Jacob, of the ruin that you are bringing upon us! think of your children think upon me "

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"Think upon you!" muttered the man, in that oblivious tone of stupidity which implies a baffled rage for the want of some better reason for venting it. "So I do. Bring me the brandy!"

"How can you ask me, Jacob," she persisted, "to bring you that which is killing you which is breaking my heart? What have I, or any of us done, to cause this dreadful change?"

But the infatuated man, with a tremendous oath, re-demanded the fiery spirit; and as she did not move, he rose up, staggered towards her, and would have struck her had not the boy John at that moment entered, and seeing what was about to happen, with a cry sprang between them, and received the blow meant for the mother, which felled him to the ground.

He rose up ferocious and bleeding; and with a cheek ashy white, turned to his father. With a terrible burst of accusation and invective, he cursed him as a drunkard and a sot, concluding with these words:

"You have destroyed your own happiness and ours; you are ruining yourself and my poor mother, and you will die in the workhouse the death of a degraded, despised drunkard. For me, you shall never see me more; and what will become of my mother and sisters I do not know; but I cast the whole weight of your cruelty to them upon your shoulders. You will cry out when it is too late you will repent when the evil hour comes and passes over you. If they do as I would have them, they would leave you to act as you will; but my mother will not you will kill her, therefore, and you will be accursed!" and he rushed from the chamber.

At this moment, Ralph made his appearance; he had a book in his hand, which he had just been reading in another chamber, and hearing the noise, he hastened to see what could be the matter. He beheld the old man in a frenzy of rage, the soul-crushed mother sitting in a chair wringing her hands, and giving every sign of the most dreadful mental agony.

A question or two enlightened him on the whole subject; and the delirious Jacob having discovered another on whom he could pour the vial of his concentrated wrath, began to assail him with the most coarse and violent language, as a beggar whom he had taken into his family, and who had sown dissension among them.

Then, and not before, did he know of the marriage between Ralph and his daughter Anne and his cup of fury was full. To tell all that followed would be detailing a picture far too shocking in its particulars to lay before the reader. He ordered Ralph to quit his presence, he raved at his helpless wife, and cursed his children. He broke open the cupboard where his stock of spirits were kept, and began to drink with the greatest avidity. He became outrageous mad. He committed acts that even with all the shamelessness he had acquired during his course of evil, would have disgusted him with himself had he been sober.

It is a shocking sight to see decent age reputable manliness thus dishonoured and depraved. It was a sight beyond all things terrifying to the stern propriety of Ralph, who would have turned from him with loathing and disgust, but that he learned and awful lesson from it, and he also had a duty to perform.

That night the married sister, with the blessing of the bruised mother, quitted the home of her childhood with her husband for ever! That night, too, the fiery heart of the boy, stricken and wounded, prompted him to quit his home; and for more than twenty years afterwards he was a wanderer in strange and distant lands. That night the poor aged mother, with convulsive sobs of agony, knelt in her bed-room and prayed for her husband and for her children; and after the horrible anguish that burst her heart and told a grief too great for words had a little subsided, she crawled to her bed, and laid her down and died!

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When the stupified, brutified man woke up the next day, there was a scene for him that almost drove him mad. It was then that he was aroused to full consciousness of the mischiefs that his intractable temper had created, that his viscous passions, unrestrained by the consideration of his duties as husband and father not to mention that peculiar guardedness of conduct which age does or ought to impose upon a man had brought to pass. Here he beheld himself once respected happy and possessed of every comfort, now ruined, broken, and deserted; his affectionate, kind wife, loving to the last, dead on her bed. His son gone none knew whither, nor with what intentions! The audacious words of the boy, whose nature had been roused by the outrage committed on his mother, whom he fondly loved, rang with prophetic menace and exaggeration in the old man's ears.

In that hour of desolation, when nothing came between him and his misery, when beholding the still corpse of her who had been so true a wife, so faithful a slave; when with no fumes of drunkenness in his brain, to distort, to dim or deaden the throes of remorse, horror, and despair, the old man saw what a fool what a madman he had been. He it was who had scattered the altar of his domestic gods, and made the home of happiness one of misery and woe. Verily "the end of sin is death!"

One daughter yet remained, for from the first to the last they all had a high sense of duty; and had not Anne been married, she too would have remained. One or two gardeners were still kept; but it was merely to prevent the grounds from falling into a wreck. In fact, with care, tottering as the affairs of Jacob Meadows were, they might have been retrieved had he himself set to work with a will. But no, he was too far in the wild waters to put his frail boat back; and when he looked upon the slight the little the almost contemptible things that had gradually pushed him on this dark and frightful sea, he could scarcely believe in the fact of his own identity.

When the turf was growing green over the bosom of his wife; when his son John was a ship boy on the mast-head of an Indiaman, gazing across the billows, thousands of miles away; when Anne and her husband were contentedly plodding on, and Anne's sister leading a dull, hopeless life, being compelled to know that no filial piety could be attributed to her, even while she fed her father with bread and supplied him with money, forced to acknowledge to herself that her father's death alone could free her or, at least, make a change in the unvarying monotony of the present, when all this came to pass, Jacob Meadows was only plunging into still direr misery.

At last the day of ruin came. It had been looked for by the trembling, palsied man. He knew that it menaced him hovered above his head dogged his footsteps, and in a manner, circled him all round. He knew how his remaining daughter had borne un murmuring his neglect, his wrath, and his abuse, neither by word or deed retorting upon him, and as little did she seek to conciliate him. It was a bitter thing for that old man to know that what she did was from a sense of duty as regarded herself, and not out of that unbidden child-like feeling which is all devotion out of pure filial love alone. It was a stern sense of duty that guided her; and Jacob Meadows looked upon himself as a man who had blasted her young life.

She took a little apartment in a mean house of a still meaner street, in one of the crowded suburbs of London, and there by wearing out her soul, and working her fingers to the bone, she supported him; and all the efforts of Ralph and Anne to find them out, proved unavailing. One, she thought, was sufficient to be sacrificed for him; and with a sublime devotion which may be strongly censured after all, she toiled on day by day and night by night.

But the gray-haired debauchee altered not his wicked way of life. Even while horrified and utterly disgusted with it, still all went on just the same. All the money he could wring out of his poor daughter's hands, he spent in the gin-shop, in company with the lost, abandoned being with whom he had formed his fatal intimacy. He had become so habituated so entangled and enmeshed, that it was a greater difficulty to return than to go forward. He would sigh at times for the familiar faces that had once thronged around him. He yearned to see Anne once more, and her husband, and perhaps his little grandchild. A gush of human feelings would come across him, not with that softening and sacred influence which good men feel, but like a tremendous agony that seared his brain and

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scalded his heart; for the source of tears was long ago dried up. The man who can weep no more must be indeed in a frightful state of moral ossification; and so it was with him. To add to his calamity, his daughter fell sick, blessed him, and died, and the remembrance of the ghastly, attenuated frame, haunted him like a spectre to his last day. She had died hungering, while he was in the tavern. He repented; but it was too late!

The wretched companion of his guilt, after one of their frightful orgies, was seized with delirium tremens, and died a horrible death. He was a spectator of that shocking parting of a guilty soul from its polluted tenement: and then he was alone in the world!

He next became an inmate of the parish workhouse. His constitution broken by excesses, beggared, and almost dead with hunger, he crawled into this last receptacle of humanity, and had barely strength to beg for a place in which he might close his eyes, ere he fell exhausted on the floor.

The parish officials speedily extracted from him who he was, what he had been, and whom he had belonged to him; and a message was soon conveyed to Ralph and his wife that Jacob Meadows was dying, that they must look to him; and that if they did not hasten to him speedily it would be too late. They lost no time in obeying this summons; and taking with them their first-born, they were soon in the revolting chamber which poverty and the ghastliest death aid to make one of the most hideous and dreadful dens upon the face of the civilised earth. It was while sitting by the old man's bed-side, the miserable pallet of a pauper, that the story of her sister's sufferings and death were made known to Anne. She could scarcely credit that the heroic girl was dead, and dead in such a manner, neither could she help expressing her feelings in a few words, which went like a knife into the heart of her miserable parent.

"Ralph! Anne!" he moaned: "pity the dying, and forgive your father. My retribution is to come!" he added, in accents of horror. "I go to God with a fearful weight upon my soul, and the thought appals horrifies me! Oh, God!" he continued, in anguish, "I repent! I repent! Pity me, Father of mercies, I repent! But no," he cried, in a piercing voice, "it is too late too late for repentance! Oh! What have I thrown away? Health, competence, and happiness! Two lives of those who were once nearest, dearest to me sacrificed! My boy a wanderer a vagabond, perhaps; but, above all, I have lost hope all hope all hope "

Then they sought, for more than an hour, to console him by repeating to him some of those precepts and promises of Scripture which have, ere now, soothed the death-beds of the repentant; but the fearful shadows which hovered about the bed of the delirious man, appeared to distract his thoughts. They placed his grandchild on his bosom, and the old man pressed his lips convulsively to its little cheeks; and, with a wild glance round the chamber, fell back upon the pillow, murmuring, "Too late too late! But I I repent. Oh, God! forgive me!" He, too, was dead!

"Is it too late, think you, Ralph?" asked Anne of her husband, in an impressive tone.

"He is before his Judge," replied Ralph, bending over the corpse. "Let us hope, dear Anne, that in the retributive workings of Providence there are expiations which we cannot comprehend or imagine."