She was good for nothing

The mayor was standing at his open window; he was wearing a dress shirt with a dainty breastpin in its frill. He was very well shaven, self-done, though he had cut himself slightly and had stuck a small bit of newspaper over the cut.

"Listen, youngster!" he boomed.

The youngster was none other than the washerwoman's son, who respectfully took off his cap as he passed. This cap was broken at the rim, so that he could put it into his pocket. In his poor but clean and very neatly mended clothes, and his heavy wooden shoes, the boy stood as respectfully as if he were before the king.

"You're a good boy, a well-behaved lad!" said the Mayor. "I suppose your mother is washing down at the river, and no doubt you are going to bring her what you have in your pocket. That's an awful thing with your mother! How much have you there?"

"A half pint," said the boy in a low, trembling voice.

"And this morning she had the same?" continued the Mayor.

"No, it was yesterday!" answered the boy.

"Two halves make a whole! She is no good! It is sad there are such people. Tell your mother she ought to be ashamed of herself. Don't you become a drunkard-but I suppose you will! Poor child! Run along now."

And the boy went, still holding his cap in his hand, while the wind rippled the waves of his yellow hair. He went down the street and through an alley to the river, where his mother stood at her washing stool in the water, beating the heavy linen with a wooden beater. The current was strong, for the mill's sluices were open; the bed sheet was dragged along by the stream and nearly swept away her washing stool, and the woman had all she could do to stand up against it.

"I was almost carried away," she said. "It's a good thing you've come, for I need something to strengthen me. It's so cold in the water; I've been standing here for six hours. Have you brought me anything?"

The boy drew forth a flask, and his mother put it to her lips and drank a little.

"Oh, that does me good! How it warms me! It's just as good as hot food, and it isn't as expensive! Drink, my boy! You look so pale, and you're freezing in your thin clothes. Remember it is autumn. Ooh, the water is cold! If only I don't get ill! But I won't. Give me a little more, and drink some yourself, but only a little drop, for you mustn't get used to it, my poor dear child!"

And she walked out of the water and up onto the bridge where the boy stood. The water dripped from the straw mat that she had tied around her waist and from her petticoat.

"I work and slave till the blood runs out at my fingernails, but I do it gladly if I can bring you up honestly, my sweet child!"

Just then came an elderly woman, poorly clad, lame in one leg, and with an enormously large, false curl hanging down over one of her eyes, which was blind. This curl was supposed to hide the eye, but it only made the defect the more conspicuous. The neighbors called her "limping Maren with the curl," and she was an old friend of the washerwoman's.

"You poor thing," she cried, "slaving and toiling in the cold water! You certainly need something to warm you a little, and yet the gossips cry about the few drops you take!" And soon all that the Mayor had said to the boy was repeated to his mother, for Maren had overheard it, and it had angered her to hear him talk so to the child about his own mother and the few drops she took, because on that same day the Mayor was having a big dinner party with many bottles of wine.

"Good wine, strong wine! Many will drink more than they should, but they don't call that drinking. They are all right, but you are good for nothing!"

"What! Did the Mayor really say that, child?" asked the laundress, her lips quivering. "So you have a mother who is good for nothing! Perhaps he's right, though he shouldn't say so to a child. But I mustn't complain; good things have come to me from that house."

"Why, yes, you were in service there, when the Mayor's parents were alive. That was many years ago. Many bushels of salt have been eaten since then, so people may well be thirsty! laughed Maren. "The big dinner today at the Mayor's would have been postponed if everything hadn't been prepared. I heard the news from the porter. A letter came, an hour ago, telling them that the Mayor's younger brother, in Copenhagen, is dead."

"Dead!" cried the laundress, turning as white as a ghost.

"What does it matter to you" said Maren. "Of course, you must have known him, since you worked in the house."

"Is he really dead? He was the best and kindest of men-indeed, there aren't many like him!" Tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Oh, my God! Everything is going around! That's because I emptied the bottle. I couldn't stand so much. I feel so ill!" And she leaned against the fence for support.

"Good heavens, you are ill, indeed!" said Maren. "Try to get over it! No, you really are sick! I'd better get you home!"

"But the washing there!"

"I'll take care of that. Here, give me your arm. The boy can stay here and watch it till I come back and wash what's left. It's only a few pieces."

The poor laundress' legs were trembling under her. "I've stood too long in the cold water, with no food since yesterday! I have a burning fever. Oh, dear Lord Jesus, help me to get home! Oh, my poor child!" And she wept.

The boy cried too, as he sat alone beside the river, guarding the wet linen. The two women made their way slowly, the washerwoman dragging her shaky limbs up the little alley and through the street where the Mayor lived. Just as she reached the front of his house, she sank down on the cobblestones. A crowd gathered around her.

Limping Maren ran into his yard for help. The Mayor and his guests came to the windows.

"It's the washerwoman!" he said. "She's had a bit too much to drink; she's no good! It's a pity for that handsome boy of hers, I really like that child, but his mother is good for nothing."

And the washerwoman was brought to her own humble room, where she was put to bed. Kindly Maren hastened to prepare a cup of warm ale with butter and sugar-she could think of no better medicine in such a case-and then returned to the river, where, although she meant well, she did a very poor job with the washing; she only pulled the wet clothes out of the water and put them into a basket.

That evening she appeared again in the washerwoman's miserable room. She had begged from the Mayor's cook a couple of roasted potatoes and a fine fat piece of ham for the sick woman. Maren and the boy feasted on these, but the patient was satisfied with the smell, "For that was very nourishing," she said.

The boy was put to bed, in the same one in which his mother slept, lying crosswise at his mother's feet, with a blanket of old blue and red carpet ends sewed together.

The laundress felt a little better now; the warm ale had given her strength, and the smell of the good food had been nourishing.

"Thank you, my kind friend," she said to Maren, "I'll tell you all about it, while the boy is asleep. He's sleeping already; see how sweet he looks with his eyes closed. He doesn't think of his mother's sufferings; may our Lord never let him feel their equal! Well, I was in service at the Councilor's, the Mayor' parents, when their youngest son came home from his studies. I was a carefree young girl then, but honest-I must say that before heaven. And the student was so pleasant and jolly; every drop of blood in his veins was honest and true; a better young man never lived. He was a son of the house, and I was only a servant, but we became sweethearts-all honorably; a kiss is no sin, after all, if people really love each other. And he told his mother that he loved me. She was an angel in his eyes, wise and kind and loving. And when he went away again he put his gold ring on my finger.

"After he had gone my mistress called me in to speak to me; she looked so grave and yet so kind, and spoke as wisely as an angel indeed. She pointed out to me the gulf of difference, both mentally and materially, that lay between her son and me. 'Now he is attracted by your good looks, but that will fade in time. You haven't received his education; intellectually you can never rise to his level. I honor the poor,' she continued, ' and I know that there is many a poor man who will sit in a higher seat in the kingdom of heaven than many a rich man; but that is no reason for crossing the barrier in this world. Left to yourselves, you two would drive your carriage full tilt against obstacles, until it toppled over with you both. Now I know that Erik, the glovemaker, a good, honest craftsman, wants to marry you; he is a well-to-do widower with no children. Think it over!'

"Every word my mistress spoke went through my heart like a knife, but I knew she was right, and that weighed heavily upon me. I kissed her hand, and my bitter tears fell upon it. But still bitterer tears fell when I lay upon my bed in my own room. Oh, the long, dreary night that followed-our Lord alone knows how I suffered!

"Not until I went to church on Sunday did peace of

mind come after my pain. It seemed the working of Providence that as I left the church I met Erik himself. There were no doubts in my mind now; we were suited to each other, both in rank and in means; he was even a well-to-do man. So I went straight up to him, took his hand, and asked, 'Do you still think of me?'

" 'Yes, always and forever,' he said.

" 'Do you want to marry a girl who likes and respects you, but does not love you?'

" 'I believe love will come,' he said, and then we joined hands.

"I went home to my mistress. The gold ring that her son had given me I had been wearing every day next to my heart, and every night on my finger in bed, but now I drew it out. I kissed it until my lips bled, then gave it to my mistress and told her that next week the banns would be read for me and the glovemaker.

"My mistress took me in her arms and kissed me; she didn't say I was good for nothing, but at that time I was perhaps better than I am now, for I had not yet known the misfortunes of the world. The wedding was at Candlemas, and for our first year we were quite happy. My husband had a workman and an apprentice with him, and you, Maren, were our servant."

"Oh, and such a good mistress you were!" said Maren. "I shall never forget how kind you and your husband were to me!"

"Ah, but you were with us during our good times! We had no children then. I never saw the student again. Oh, yes, I saw him once, but he didn't see me. He came to his mother's funeral, and I saw him standing by her grave, looking so sad and pale-but that was all for his mother's sake. When his father died later he was abroad and didn't come to that funeral. He didn't come here again; he became a lawyer, and he never married, I know. But he thought no more of me, and if he had seen me he would certainly have never recognized me, ugly as I am now. And it is all for the best!"

Then she went on to tell of the bitter days of hardship, when misfortune had fallen upon them. They had saved five hundred dollars, and since in their neighborhood a house could be bought for two hundred, they considered it a good investment to buy one, tear it down, and build again. So the house was bought, and the bricklayers and carpenters estimated that the new house would cost a thousand and twenty dollars. Erik had credit and borrowed that sum in Copenhagen, but the captain who was to have brought the money was shipwrecked and the money lost.

"It was just then that my darling boy, who lies sleeping there, was born. Then his father had a long and severe illness, and for nine months I even had to dress and undress him every day. We kept on going backward. We had to borrow more and more; one by one all our possessions were sold; and at last Erik died. Since then I have worked and slaved for the boy's sake, have gone out scrubbing floors and washing linen, done coarse work or fine, whatever I could get. But I was not to be better off; it is the Lord's will! He will take me away and find better provisions for my child." Then she fell asleep.

In the morning she seemed better and decided she was strong enough to return to her work. But the moment she felt the cold water a shivering seized her; she grasped about convulsively with her hands, took one step forward, and fell. Her head lay on the dry bank, but her feet were in the water of the river; her wooden shoes, in each of which there was a handful of straw, were carried away by the current.

And here she was found by Maren, when she came to bring her some coffee.

A message had come to her lodging that the Mayor wanted to see her, for he had something to say to her. It was too late. A doctor was summoned; the poor washerwoman was dead.

"She has drunk herself to death," said the Mayor.

The letter that had brought the Mayor the news of his brother's death also gave a summary of his will, and among other bequests he had left six hundred dollars to the glovemaker's widow, who had formerly served his parents! The money was to be paid at discretion in large or small sums to her and her child.

"There was some nonsense about love between my brother and her," said the Mayor. "It's just as well she's out of the way. Now it will all come to the boy, and I'll place him with some honest people who will make him a good workman." And on these words our Lord laid his blessings.

And the Mayor sent for the boy, promised to take care of him, and told him it was a lucky thing his mother was dead; she was good for nothing.

They carried her to the churchyard, to a pauper's grave. Maren planted a little rose tree on her grave, while the boy stood beside her.

"My darling mother," he said as the tears started from his eyes. "Is it true that she was good for nothing?"

"No, it is not true!" said the old woman, looking up to

heaven. "I have known it for many years and especially since the night before she died. I tell you she was a good and fine woman, and our Lord in heaven will say so, too, so let the world say: 'She was good for nothing!'"

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