

The Last Drink.

BY ANGUS EVAN ABBOTT.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. S. BOYD.

THEY had known each other so long, they had been so suited to one another, their tastes so beautifully disagreed in minor details, and blended so well in the generalities of life, that it was a rude shock to Jim Hanson, when he awoke, after one of their protracted sprees, to find that Tom Reycraft had not lived through it in the old way. Hanson was in a terribly befuddled condition when the coroner's officer attempted to rouse him far enough out of his stupor to give his evidence at the inquest then about to be held. So quiet he lay, and so stupid he looked, that the officer gave up the job as a bad one and went his way.

Hanson's evidence was really of no importance.

Everyone in the little Essex village knew that the two cronies had again spent their last penny in drink, and this was

nothing new. In fact, the only difference between this and a hundred other sprees was that Reycraft died. So Hanson was allowed to lie on the straw in the loft of the stable



"WAS ALLOWED TO LIE ON THE STRAW."

where the two had spent the night together, and Tom Reycraft was buried in the far corner of the tiny weed-grown graveyard.

But although Hanson gave no outward indication of life, his brain grasped the full meaning of the news which had been told him, and he now lay thinking as he had never thought before. His soul within him burned like a flame, and his nimble mind flew over the events of his past life, picking out each circumstance and moment which had any connection with the memory of his lost companion. Their meeting, the gradual development of their friendship, the firm cementing of that fellowship by frequent sprees and hard drinking, the scoffs they had borne together, the long days passed in the village lock-up, singing songs or fiercely arguing politics—for Tom had always been a Radical—their long tramps over the country in the summer time, all these he lived

anew as they flashed across his brain. Notwithstanding this mental activity, his body lay on the straw without a motion, and even when the stable-boy kicked him in the ribs—having nothing else to do at the moment—he felt mental, but no physical pain.

When he had summed up the more prominent features of their lives, his thoughts turned to the circumstances of the previous night. He remembered, with a feeling of awe, that Reycraft had solemnly sworn this should be their last carouse, that after the night he would touch liquor no more. Hanson remembered that he had laughed at the idea.

“Whiskey is good enough for me, Tom. I will stick to it, and I have no doubt it will stick to me,” he said, when Reycraft suggested reform.

Reycraft shook his head solemnly.

“I have been thinking the matter over, Jim,” he said at last, “and something tells me that to-night I must give up drinking. I scarcely see how it is to be done, and I know it is deserting the principles of my forefathers—all of them that ever I heard of—and my own past life, but it must be done. I turn teetotaler to-night.”

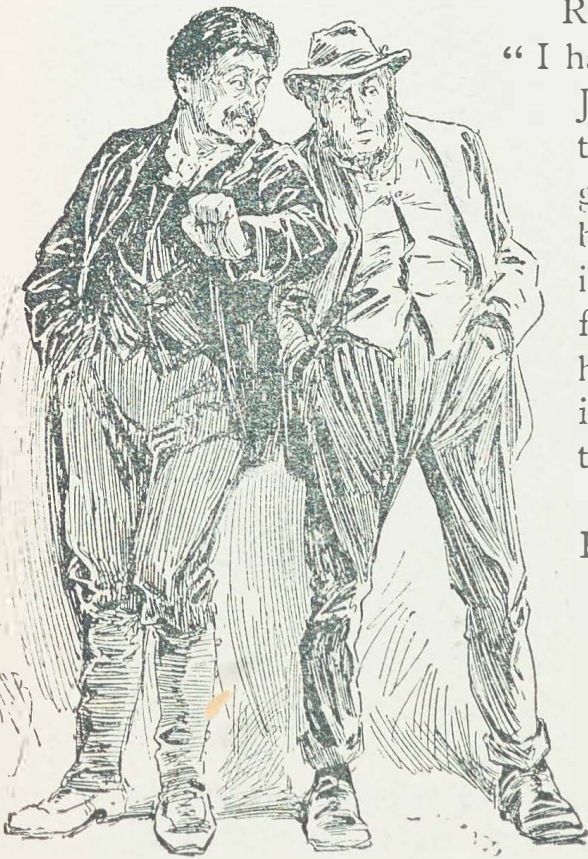
These words now seemed to Hanson prophetic. He remembered the quiet tone in which they were spoken. Tom continued:

“Jim, as this is to be our last, it must be an effective drunk. I would like all our past little sprees to sink into insignificance when compared with this one. There must be no

half-hearted ways about it. We must reach a state of complete and heavenly chaos—something to be remembered for ever. What do you say?”

“Tom, I agree. I am with you; but some of our past entertainments will take considerable beating,” answered Hanson gravely.

“I know it; but this, the last, shall beat them. When we awake from it the future must contain nothing further in the



“‘I TURN TEETOTALER TO-NIGHT.’”

drinking line. And now, not that I suspect you of shirking, but that it may be perfectly understood by us both, there must be fair and square drinking, glass to glass, filled up and swallowed like men."

Again Hanson agreed with his whole heart. "How for the liquor. How many bottles can you steal from old Groves while I am buying a couple? These liquor grocers dare not kick up much of a row if we are caught. He shouldn't sell liquor to the likes of us, but he does all the same. How many can you get away with, Jim?"

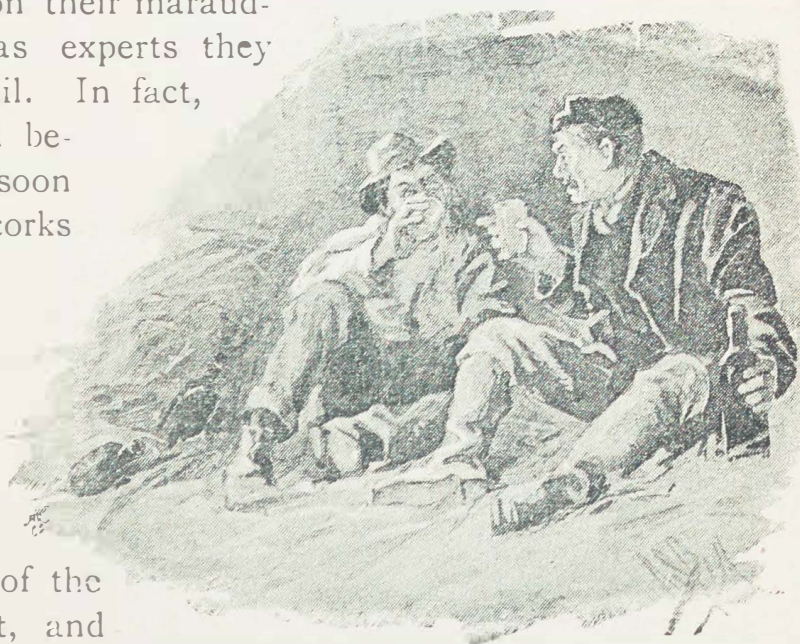
"From four to six, I should think," answered Hanson, in the most matter-of-fact way. He was used to the business.

So the two set out on their marauding expedition, and as experts they knew no such word as fail. In fact, Hanson was successful beyond his hopes, and soon the sound of drawing corks was heard in Peters's stable loft.

Hanson, as he now lay limp and motionless, tried to recollect every incident of the carouse. His mind retained each particular of the early part of the night, and how jolly Reycraft had been; but he was startled to remember that soon after the drinking began Tom had said to him:

"You're shirking, Jim, my boy. *Fill* your glass, do you hear, and do not spill it over you like a baby."

Hanson tried to dismiss this point from his mind, but it would not go. The more he wished to forget it the louder it rang in his ear. He was appalled to think that perhaps he had not carried out his compact with Tom. Had he not drunk fair? If he had, how was it that he lay there alive, and Tom, a much stronger man, was already in his coffin! His conscience tormented him with the terrible thought, and all day he lay in sore distress, hoping he had done his duty to poor Tom Reycraft, but fearing the more as time went on—fearing, almost believing, that he had not drunk fairly. So great was his anguish, that when he heard footsteps on



"IN PETERS'S STABLE LOFT."

the ladder, he hoped that it might be the stable-boy again coming to kick him where he lay. It was indeed the stable-boy, but this time others followed. The village constable and old Peters himself stood over him.

"Dead drunk yet," said the constable, pushing Hanson rudely with his foot. "He will take a lot of moving. Our best way is to put a rope under his arms and lower him to the barrow below."

"Around his neck, I say," growled Peters, and then, a better feeling coming over him, he said :

"No, Bill, let him sleep it out where he is. He won't stir till morning, and you can get him then."

The three at this went down the ladder; the stable-boy waiting long enough to plant another kick where he thought it might do most good, out of pure, ignorant cruelty.

Left alone, a burning desire to see his old friend seized Hanson. He thought that if he could but have a few words with Reycraft he might hear the truth of his drinking—whether he had indeed wronged his friend, and if he had, atone for it in any way Tom demanded. Two or three times he

made a strong endeavour to rise, but it was no use. Maddened by his

helplessness, he mentally wrenched and tore at himself, and was delighted to see his limbs moving, although they seemed to writhe in great pain. Continuing to struggle, he was overjoyed to find himself at last on his feet, and, without pausing an instant, he reached for the ladder and made his way to the village street. Not a moment did

"THEY WENT
DOWN THE
LADDER."

he delay, but turning in the direction of the graveyard, he hurried along, his whole mind bent on seeing his old companion once more. The lights of the village were all extinguished, even the windows of the Red Lion were dark, and from this he knew it must be approaching, or past, midnight. Once he nearly ran

against a late foot passenger, the village doctor, but although he stood close to where the doctor passed, he was unnoticed. Along the road he ran once more, feeling lighter at every step, and, coming to the paling which surrounded the ill-kept cemetery, jumped lightly over and stood among the gravestones, slabs of white in the black night. Cautiously he made his way over the graves, going in the direction he imagined his friend must be, and he had almost reached the farthest grave, when he was startled by hearing someone call him by name.

Turning sharply around, he beheld a sight that caused a chill to creep through him. Seated on a mound of fresh soil—a new-made grave—was his friend, legs crossed and head resting on one hand, while the fingers of the other were sifting the brown mould carelessly over the grass. Without changing his position, Reycraft said, quite distinctly, his great eyes looking at Hanson in an awe-inspiring way:

"I knew you would come, Jim. I have been waiting for you. Sit by my side."

Hanson moved slowly to the grave, and sat down with his friend. For some time neither spoke, each playing with the earth which had so recently been patted into proper shape by the sexton's spade.

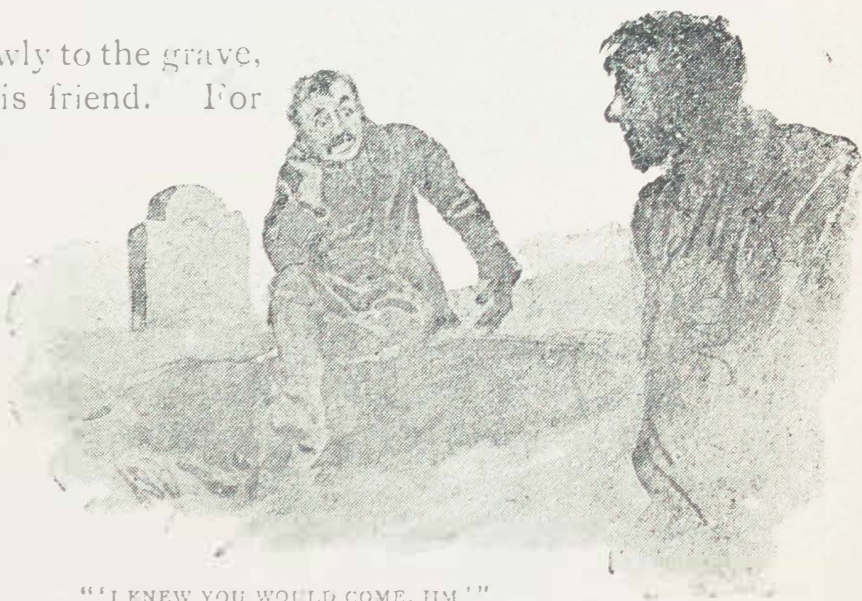
"I came as soon as I could, 'Tom,'" said Hanson at last.

"I could not rouse my body for a long time, although my thoughts were with you. But I made my body rise at last, and have run all the way."

Reycraft looked curiously at his friend and smiled.

"Bodies are cumbersome things, Jim. We are better without them—at least I am. I said I would give up drinking last night, do you remember, and I have kept my word. So will you, I think," Reycraft said quietly.

"That I will from this moment," answered Hanson, "and say! Tom, did I—did I do the right thing last night? Did I drink fair and square?"



"I KNEW YOU WOULD COME, JIM"

"You drank like a man, glass and glass with me. You never drank fairer in your life, and that is saying something, Jim."

"Oh! Tom, you have lifted a load off my soul, you have indeed. I was afraid I had shirked. Now I can live happy all my days since I have heard this from you."

Hanson was so overjoyed that he sprang to his feet and danced around the grave with delight. Reycraft looked at him with an amused expression.

"Sit down and let us talk of old times," he said at last; and the two, once more seated together, launched forth into all their

past adventures and carouses, their hardships, pleasures, and prospects.

The first faint glimmer of light appeared in the east, increasing with

the flush of day. It

was not until the

sun made its ap-

pearance that Han-

son, looking at his

friend, said, as if the

thought had just occurred to him:

"But you must go now, Tom. Shall I see you again?"

"Why must I go?"

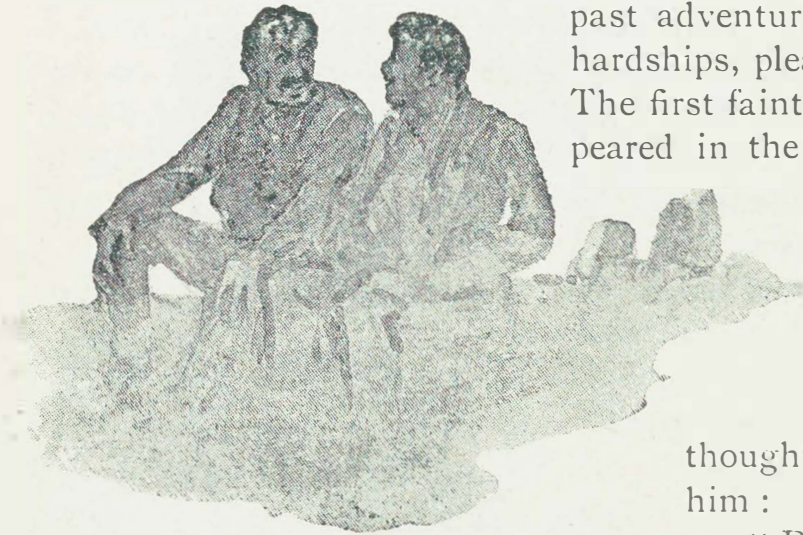
"I thought you had to go when morning broke. Haven't you? I always heard so."

Tom chuckled.

"You are the only one who can see me, Jim," he said. "Let us talk while we may."

The morning wore on, and the sun rose higher and higher, but still the two sat talking. From where they were they could see the road winding down to the village, and along it now sped the farmers' carts and traps to and fro. As Hanson talked he kept a sharp look-out along the road for any signs of the constable, whom he knew must now be looking for him. Presently his eye spied a knot of men coming from the village, bearing something on their shoulders. They marched quite slowly, and as they drew nearer Jim made out that it was a coffin they carried. He called his friend's attention to the group.

"It is evidently a coffin they bear," answered Reycraft; "but what of it? Let them come."



"ONCE MORE SEATED TOGETHER."

"They may give the constable information of my whereabouts," Hanson said, in some alarm.

"Let them. It won't hurt. Sit down. Sit down. You surely will not desert me now that we have met."

By this time the men with the coffin had passed through the gate, and the sexton, spade in hand, walked straight towards the spot where the two were sitting. Tom slowly arose and stepped a few paces away, and Hanson followed him.

"The same grave for the same drunk," said the sexton, as he jabbed his spade savagely into the mould which had been so lately put in place. "They lived together, drank together, died together, and now they can lie together. I warrant you their souls are together now—if such people have souls. Jim Hanson's box goes at top of Tom Reycraft's box."

During this speech Jim Hanson, as in a trance, stood staring at the sexton. Turning quickly to Reycraft, he clutched him by the arm :

"Tom! Tom! Am I dead?"

Reycraft smiled his well-known smile.

"We are both dead, Jim," he said.

