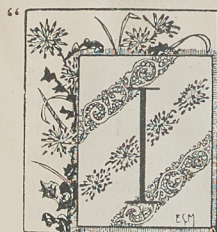


TEDDY'S TREE

A LONDON STORY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "COLONEL KIT."



"I'S quite dead, mother!"

"Maybe not; it don't look very bright, though, but give it a drop of water—a good drop this time."

"I keep on, and it ain't no good, mother; do you think I could have give it too much?"

"Well, it do feel rather wettish: I'll drain some of the water off, and then, if the sun comes out, see if it don't pick up a bit. I'll have to be off now; Mrs. Porter 'ull give you a look in."

Teddy, left alone, looked mournfully at the three flower-pots standing in a row on the window-ledge; in one of them some hemp-seed had grown and flourished, in another a wretched-looking fern was doing its best under very adverse circumstances, but it was the third pot which caused the anxiety—real primroses they were to be, and Teddy had tended and cherished the roots till his very care had defeated his ends, and the leaves that had struggled out became withered and lifeless. To grow things for himself was Teddy's ambition; he often had bunches of flowers brought him, but they died so quickly that to have them growing of his very own was desirable, but, also it seemed, quite unattainable.

Teddy was lying propped up with pillows at a little back window; in front of him was a queer contrivance which served two purposes, for it did very well for a table, and also kept the coverings from hurting him.

"It don't do to hurt a boy what hasn't no legs," he would say with a comical air of pride in his own injuries; he had known a boy who had had to have one leg taken off, but that both had to go had made Teddy an object of great interest even in the hospital. He had been run over by an omnibus, and had suffered greatly; having no constitution to speak of, he had never recovered from the operation, and his wounds would not heal properly. Then the parents had stepped in and asked to have him home again—home consisted of one back-room; but he was the only child, and, in spite of much kindness, Teddy had never been really happy in the hospital. What would father do while mother was out? If there were no Teddy to look after him and keep him company, he would pay more frequent visits to the public-house at the corner, and when mother came home there would be unpleasantness.

Thinking of those things, the thin face became

smaller and thinner, and the parents noted the fact.

"He don't get on, miss," said Mr. Pilcher, rather aggressively.

"No," said the nurse, not noticing his manner.

"We'll have him home, then," Mrs. Pilcher said; and Teddy's face brightened so suddenly that the nurse noted it, and suggested their seeing the house-surgeon.

That gentleman talked to them gravely; he said he could not refuse to let the boy go, they had done their best for him, but life was surely ebbing from him. He told them how to dress his wounds, and how to move the boy painlessly; then Teddy was taken home and installed by the window in the little back room.

At first he really seemed a little better, then he fell back again, and they had to own that they would not be able to keep him with them for long. They loved him dearly, yet, with the strange way of some uneducated people, talked openly before him of his departure, pointing out symptoms which showed that the time could not be far off.

The Pilchers lived in the lower back room which looked on a dejected piece of ground, which Teddy longed to make into a garden. If he could only have a tree there, how delightful it would be to watch the leaves unfolding! Next-door-but-one they had an elder-tree, which he could see by leaning out of the window, and when in full flower the neighbour always sent him a big bunch of the strong-smelling, greeny-white blossoms. But he wanted one of his own; and, love them as he did, the little row of flower-pots could not take the place of a real tree.

Once Mr. Pilcher had carried him into the park; but the experiment proved so painful, and Teddy was so much worse afterwards, that it was never repeated.

Mrs. Pilcher came home from her work rather late the evening after Teddy had been bewailing his primroses and found the room in darkness, and the little boy lying asleep by the still open window.

"Mrs. Porter might have brought you a light, and put down the window," she said, resentfully, as Teddy roused.

"I didn't mind, mother; the matches are on the mantelpiece, and there's father!"

They heard Mr. Pilcher's voice, but he did not come in; there was a sound as of something heavy being dragged along, then a curious snapping, brushing noise.



(From a Drawing by Mrs. H. M. STANLEY.)

"Mrs. Porter held the bundle low down, and turned back a corner of the shawl."—p. 407.

"What is it?" called out Mrs. Pilcher.

"It's a tree for Teddy," Mr. Pilcher answered, looking in, hot and perspiring; "open the door, missus, and I'll get it outside."

"Oh," cried Teddy, rapturously, "bring it to the window, father—is it really and truly a live tree?"

The pulling and snapping went on outside, and Teddy sat up anxiously. "Don't hurt it, father; bring it to the window, so as I can feel it."

After a little more struggling, the tree was got outside, and Mr. Pilcher brought it to the window. Teddy's little thin hands shook with excitement as he felt the twigs.

"Where did it come from, father?" asked Mrs. Pilcher.

"I didn't get a job to-day, and I see a man as couldn't get his horse along. I helped a bit; then, somehow, we got to talking of Teddy here, and how he wanted a tree, and he says as he's just going to cut down one on some land as is wanted for building, and Teddy's welcome to it. So here it is."

"You'll never see to plant it to-night," said Mrs. Pilcher; "throw a pail of water over the roots, and plant it first thing to-morrow."

Teddy was not famous for good nights, but that night he scarcely slept at all. His parents gave good proof of sleeping soundly; and he pressed his little face against the window trying to see his tree, and nervous whenever he heard cats about lest they should harm it.

"It's to go right in the very middle," he announced excitedly when his parents arose; "then the boys from the other gardens won't be able to climb on it; and you'll dig a deep, deep hole, won't you, father?"

"Ah, we'll see," said Pilcher, who in his slow way was really glad and interested. "The ground'll be pretty hard and full of stones—s'pose I go and see if I can't find a pail of manure?"

Teddy was much too excited to eat the bloater his mother provided for his breakfast.

"It's enough breakfast to see my tree," he said, touching the bare twigs caressingly. "I do hope father won't forget to borrow a spade."

Mr. Pilcher came in carrying the pail and a borrowed spade, and began to dig. It was very hard work, and when at last he had made some impression on the ground stones and cinders turned up instead of soil.

"Twas a good thing I thought of that there pail of stuff," Pilcher said, pausing for breath.

"You'll do it deep, won't you, father?" came from the interested little spectator by the window.

Presently the hole yawned deep and wide; the earth thrown up was not very savoury-looking, and had not the pleasant odour that usually comes from freshly turned soil; but Teddy was not critical. There was the hole and the tree to go in it, and if love and care could assist the growth of the latter, grow it would.

With Mrs. Pilcher's assistance the tree was got into its place, and tied to the support which the friend of yesterday had provided; then the hole was filled up, two or three pails of water poured on, and Mr. Pilcher sat himself down to wipe his heated brow and survey his work.

"Well, Ted, so you've got your tree, you see."

But just then Teddy was past speaking about it; there were tears in his eyes and a queer choking feeling in his throat.

"It's lovely," he gasped at last; "and, mother, just do see how splendid and blue the sky looks through the branches."

"You are a queer one, Ted," Mrs. Pilcher answered; "I don't see what difference it can make looking at the sky through them bare boughs."

No one but Teddy could tell the difference it made to him, and he could not put it into words. He would lie content for hours, watching the network of delicate twigs against the background of grey or blue sky, soothed by many comforting and helpful thoughts. He had been taught very little of what was good, but he remembered the hospital teaching, and tried to put into practice what he did know. He must be patient under his pain, and not call his mother for every little thing; he must do all he could to help his father, welcome him when he came in, and not make the home sad with complaining. That

was Teddy's rule of life, which sounds simple enough, yet required a very steadfast purpose to fulfil. And beyond it all was the hope of a better, fuller life to come—a life which Teddy pictured to himself as full of trees, and flowers, and love.

Some of those spring days were very close and oppressive, but though Teddy lay and gasped he rejoiced because the heat would be good for his tree. The elder-tree in the neighbour's garden became covered with creamy blossoms, but no leaves showed on the transplanted tree, whose boughs stretched out bare and pathetic, as though protesting against its surroundings.

"Tain't a bit o' good," said Pilcher one night, gloomily, after inspecting it carefully, and breaking off a little twig, which snapped with ominous readiness; "you'd best use it up for firewood, missus."

"No, no!" cried Teddy, sharply; "it grows. I know it does. I can see it 'gainst the sky; there's little bits poking out from the long ones. You mustn't cut it down. It's my tree; you gave it to me for my very own." He raised himself, then cried out with pain, and sank back quivering all over.

"There, there!" Mrs. Pilcher said, as she did her best to ease him; "nobody ain't going to cut your tree down. Here, drink this nice drop of gravy, there's a lovey."

That sharp twinge of pain lasted longer than usual, and it was hours before Teddy could regain his ordinary calm; then he was too exhausted to speak much, but lay with his shadowy little face turned towards the window watching his tree.

"He won't bear many of them turns," said Mrs. Porter, who had come from up-stairs and stood looking at him.

"I doubt he won't," Mrs. Pilcher answered, wiping her eyes; "and what we'll do without him I don't know. Pilcher, he'll go back to his old ways, I s'pose."

"There's death writ plainly on his face," Mrs. Porter said; "many's the time I've seen that look on a face that's been in its coffin next time I see it—but, pore dear! you wouldn't wish to keep him suffering like that, and it'll be a happy release."

They had scarcely lowered their voices, and Teddy heard it all undisturbed; there was even the shadow of a smile on his tranquil little face, and the waving twigs seemed to beckon him to them.

"Mother," he said that evening, "it ain't been bad, being the only one; but now I'm going I do wish as how you'd got another."

Mrs. Pilcher looked at him suddenly with a curious expression.

"Ah, my Teddy," she said, catching her breath, "there'll never be none like you to me."

He smiled a little and touched her hand.

"You'll have my tree took care of, won't you, mother? I'm sure it ain't dead; it grows, and I'd like to think you have it to remember me by."

"As if I want anything to remind me; but there, it shall stay—I promise you solemn."

"And, mother, don't let father go back to the public; he ain't near so bad as some boys' fathers, and he don't need nagging at."

"Well, Teddy, I won't do more nagging than I can help, but it's pretty hard to hold my tongue when I come in tired and he ain't earned a penny."

"Yes," said Teddy, "I know, but he's very well-meaning. And Mrs. Porter is to have my hemp-seed; she thinks a deal of it."

Thus Teddy made his testamentary arrangements, and, having set his worldly affairs in order, ceased to talk much.

"I do wish it would rain to-night," he said in one of his conversational moments; "then my tree would grow like anything."

"Ah, dearie, and beautiful it would look," his mother said to humour him. She had no doubt that the tree was quite dead.

Teddy had been in so much pain that day that with comparative ease he became drowsy, and did not notice that his mother stayed in Mrs. Porter's room, where she had gone late that evening; he did not notice either that presently the rain pattered on the window with a steady persistency that would have delighted him had he heard it.

"Where's mother?" he asked, rousing with the early dawn, and noticing with surprise that his father was moving about.

"She ain't come down yet; I'm going up to Mrs. Porter's room to see after her," Mr. Pilcher answered.

He was away so long that Teddy had begun to be afraid something was the matter, when he heard steps on the stairs, and then Mrs. Porter came in with a bundle in her arms.

"Where's mother?" he said. "I want her; she's stayed away all night."

"I know, dearie," Mrs. Porter answered importantly, "but she can't, so to say, help it; her love, and she's going on beautiful, and here's something for you to look at."

Mrs. Porter held the bundle low down, and turned back a corner of the shawl which covered it. Teddy started with surprise, for there lay a tiny red-faced baby, fast asleep, with two mites of fists lying against its shoulders.

"Oh," cried Teddy, "where did it come from? Whose is it?"

"Why, Teddy," explained Mrs. Porter, "it's a dear little sister for you—and a most beautiful baby she is, bless her heart!"

"Let me hold her," said Teddy, stretching out

his weak little arms, in which even that morsel of babyhood felt heavy. He pressed his lips against the small puckered forehead, and kept so still that Mrs. Porter did not like to disturb him.

"I am glad they'll have her when I'm gone," he said, "and a girl'll be such a help to mother—look! do just look there!"

He started so that Mrs. Porter put a protecting hand on the baby; Teddy, his face all aglow, was pointing out of the window. The rain had ceased, but the slates were still shining with wet, and the garden was one mess of brown sloppiness, in the midst of which the tree stood up straight and dripping, while through its glistening dark branches tiny points of green were showing.

"It's come! I knew it wasn't dead," he whispered, awed with joy; "tell mother about it. The tree and my little sister in one day! it's almost too much happiness."

Teddy had something to watch now, and though he wanted his mother, the time did not seem long; sometimes Mrs. Porter would let him have the baby beside him for quite a long time, and there were the unfolding leaves—an endless source of joy and wonder. His father was never away from him long now, and the hospital doctor, who had been so kind to him, came to see him. The neighbours, too, were always in and out, bringing little things to tempt his appetite, and talking openly of his decline.

Mrs. Pilcher was soon down-stairs to her boy, but he had got beyond talking; he just greeted her with a smile, then closed his eyes and drifted out of life so calmly they could scarcely realise that he had gone.

When he was laid in his coffin the parents stood watching the still little face. A neighbour had sent in a big bunch of pink roses, which stood in a jar at his head.

"His hands look kind of empty," Pilcher said. Mrs. Porter, who had done the last kind offices, had crossed the hands on the chest.

"Seems as if it can't be our Teddy laying there so quiet, not noticing how beautiful his tree grows—I know!" Mrs. Pilcher turned and went out, coming back with some little boughs from Teddy's tree. She tenderly placed them beneath the folded hands, almost fancying that the fingers closed round them.

"Ah, that's what he wanted," Pilcher said approvingly. "He'll be more comfortable like with a bit of his tree; and, Anna, my dear, we'll let it mind us to be happy together, and bring the little 'un up right and good."

He leaned over and kissed his wife across the coffin, while the baby in her arms gave a sudden gurgle, as though pleased with the prospect before her.