

The Runaway

By Marion Hepworth-Dixon

I

“ I AM sorry to say, Mrs. Reinhart, that your son is—a profligate.”

Mr. Knowler was visibly distressed in giving voice to the words, and, in order to hide his evident emotion, drew a faded silk handkerchief from the pocket of his lengthy frock-coat and blew his nose irritably, as he gazed somewhat foolishly over the top of the bandanna round the dingy office, and out on to the bare yellow-brick wall which faced the solitary window.

He was a small, narrow-chested little man with innocent blue eyes, and a shrill voice, a little man who had cultivated a certain abruptness of manner in order to give weight and authority to his otherwise unimposing personality. Not that Mr. Josiah Knowler's personality lacked impressiveness in the eyes of the woman now seated in front of him. A poor physiognomist at any time, Mrs. Reinhart saw in Mr. Josiah the very form and front of visible and determinating forces. Was he not the senior partner, forsooth, in the great firm of Knowler Brothers, piano-makers, and the actual recipient, some thirteen months back, of her horde of five and twenty pounds paid in exchange for, the indentures promising her
son

son lessons in piano-tuning? In the widow's eyes Mr. Knowler's pockets figuratively bulged with the sum of her small savings, a sum it had taken her well-nigh as many years to amass as it represented actual coin of the realm.

"He hasn't been to his work?" she queried evasively, as her eyes dwelt on Mr. Josiah's profile and on the meagre cheek made ruddy by the curious little red veins which spread, fibre-like, over the averted cheek-bone.

"Your son," said Mr. Josiah, turning to her and replacing his pocket-handkerchief with a superfluous flourish, "your son, Mrs. Reinhart, has attended on two occasions—or, to be absolutely correct, on three occasions—only during the last seven weeks."

The woman's voice faltered as she answered:

"Then you've not been paying 'im, sir?"

"Apprentices are paid at the end of their week's work—their full week's work," Mr. Knowler reminded her.

"He was to have four-and-six given 'im the first year, five-and-six the second——"

"For work done, Mrs. Reinhart, for work done."

Mr. Knowler had been fussily replacing a stray paper in his desk at the moment of speaking, and the sharp snap with which the little gentleman reclosed the lid made the reply seem, in a sense, final and unanswerable to Mrs. Reinhart.

In the vague labyrinth of her mind she dimly felt the logic of the master's attitude, while she at the same time cast about for some solution of the inexplicable problem presented by a new presentation of facts. A suspicion which she as yet dared not put into words forced itself upon her. Surely the thing she feared most in all the world could not be true? Yet there was the sovereign missed from the mantelpiece; the gold brooch—given her by her poor dead husband on their wedding-day—which she had

had mislaid and could not put her hand upon. Was it conceivable that her son——

In the pause that followed Mrs. Reinhart heard the faint monotonous sound of repeated chords, chords indicating the tuning of a distant piano, from an opposite wing of the building, and then the gruff laughter of two or three workmen, apparently lifting some heavy object, in the asphalt court below the window.

Mr. Josiah Knowler fidgeted. He wished it to be understood that his time was valuable, and half rose from his seat as he made a mechanical movement in the direction of the office bell.

“He’s not been home for a fortnight ; he hasn’t earnt anything here—— Where did he get it from ?”

The ellipsis in Mrs. Reinhart’s speech made it in no wise unintelligible to her listener. He was accustomed to deal with the class from which Mrs. Reinhart sprang, and answered with a perfect appreciation of her meaning :

“Your son appears to have plenty of money to spend, my good woman.”

“I don’t know how he comes by it !” she ejaculated.

“He would appear to have resources,” ventured the senior partner.

“He hasn’t a farthing, sir. Not one. It’s just what I can earn, and that at the best is half a crown a day, by going out to sew at ladies’ houses. And then the work’s precarious ; there’s weeks and weeks when there’s nothing doing.”

“His companions appear to be—to be the least advisable for a lad,” suggested Mr. Knowler. “My brother and I have both personally represented——”

“Oh ! He never will have nothing said,” groaned the woman ; “he’s stubborn, he’s terrible stubborn.”

“He’s incorrigibly idle,” supplemented Mr. Josiah Knowler.

Mrs. Reinhart’s face twitched nervously as she half turned with
a shrinking

a shrinking movement and clasped the back of the chair she had been sitting on. Was it to be eternally and indefinitely the same story? Was hers to be that weary round of endeavour which meets only with disappointment and failure? It was impossible to forget that the boy had already run away from the electric light works, where he had earnt his eighteen shillings a week, or that he had been turned away for non-attendance at the musical instrument makers', she had got him into with her brother's influence, at Hounslow. And now that she had actually staked her last farthing at Messrs. Knowler Brothers, her efforts seemed as fruitless as heretofore.

Without, in the cheerless northern suburb in which she found herself in a few moments' time, there was little outward presage of the coming spring. Everywhere were the stain and soil of winter. April was already at hand, but soot hung on the skeleton tracery of the rare trees which overtopped the garden walls; only a bud, on some early flowering shrub, told of a world of green to come. Yet a wind blowing from out the west, and flapping its damp fingers in her tired face, seemed to speak of other and less sordid surroundings. The wind blew from out the west bringing its message from the sea, and with it the ever-recurring memory of the sailor husband who had been so loyal a companion to her in the brief years of their married life. Though a Swede, the elder Reinhart had suffered from exposure to the cold, a severe winter on the Atlantic helping to aggravate the chest complaint to which he succumbed at Greenwich Hospital. The end had been sudden, and it was hardly an hour before the final spasm that Mrs. Reinhart promised the dying man that their son should be spared like hardships.

Hardships! . . . the wet sea wind lifted the pale hair from the anæmic face and the dull eyes lighted as she thought of the
wide

wide sea's open highways. The life might be hard for those who do business in great waters, but it was not mere hardship, as she knew, which wore away body and soul. It was the smirch or big cities which dulled the wholesome buoyancy of the blood.

And instinctively Mrs. Reinhart felt for the foreign envelope she had received from Sweden the same morning, and which she had thrust into her pocket on starting out on her errand to Mr. Knowler. It was from her dead husband's mother, to whom she wrote regularly, but whose letter she had forgotten in her anxiety or the morning. She was glad of anything to distract her thoughts now, and tore it open in the street.

"Come, my daughter," the cramped foreign writing ran, "I am fast growing old and need younger eyes than mine about the farm. If you fear to cross the seas alone, my brother is plying between London and Gottenburg. You will find him at Mill-wall till Saturday. Delay no more, my child. Come when he sails. Ask only for the *Eidelweiss*, and he will bring you surely to me . . ."

The offer was one that had been made many times, but that the widow had regularly refused on account of her determination to remain near her son.

"Had her presence availed anything?" she asked herself, as she turned down a neglected-looking street running eastward off the Hampstead Road, and climbed the mildewed steps of a squalid house, guarded by a somewhat forbidding row of rusty railings, which stood on the left-hand side of the way.

"Had either entreaty or remonstrance availed?" The reiteration of the thought was disheartening during the long hours of the afternoon as her work fell from her lap and her eye wandered to the rocking tree-tops, which now and again touched the blurred window pane. The room was directly under the roof, so that the
outside

outside message from the world came in gusts which shook the crazy bolts and fastenings. Presently she rose and loosed them, and pushing down the sash, braced herself to the wild air which somehow seemed to calm the harassing trend of her thoughts. In herself there was confusion, doubt, and misery, and, added to misery, a fearful misgiving she could not name. There was life and stir, in a sense hope, in that swaying world without. The vanishing mists, the larger horizons, the opening of unknown aerial spaces, all spoke of the expansion of external things. She could not put the thought into words, but it was God's open air, and spoke in some inexplicable way of life's larger and more wholesome purposes. It spoke of the virile satisfaction of accomplishment, of an existence in which endeavour is not fruitless, in which even a weary woman's output has some sort of reward. So she let the buoyant gusts sweep through the dingy little room, which it shook as autumn winds sway a rotting leaf. And here, too, was the sterility of autumn. Lifeless, empty and unreal, in the woman's eyes everything that had been born there was dead—all her ambition for her son, all her hopes of living with him in happy comradeship. The very round of effort which had kept her cribbed within those four walls seemed to show itself a vain thing. It had availed nothing. The boy for whom she had sacrificed her last sovereign would not work.

"Had she not been paying good money for an empty room this fortnight past?" she asked herself in comical anti-climax to her forerunning mood. Worse than that—the thought took the very salt and flavour out of life—he had not been to the manufactory for seven weeks.

II

It was with an effort that Mrs. Reinhart at length closed the window and took up the forgotten sewing which had slipped on to the floor. How behindhand she was! A skirt had to be finished that night. Without a pause the long monotonous hours of the afternoon passed until it was time to rekindle the bit of fire and grope about for a candle-end.

The scrap of supper was soon eaten, and then, while the fragments still strewed the table, she found her gaze wandering round from one familiar object to another. It was strange how to-night the room—the scene of her last fourteen or fifteen years' labour—stood bared to the flickering eye of the solitary candle. There was the little bed, with its faded grey shawl for a covering, on which she had tossed those years of lonely nights; there, the faded velvet sofa, once the pride of the young married couple's parlour, on which she had lain weak, but ridiculously happy, in those long summer days following the birth of her child. Now, in the rare moments in which she threw herself upon the couch, it was when she returned at night, too faint and worn out to eat, after ten or eleven hours' sewing. There was little else in the room: nothing but the gamboge-coloured tin box, artlessly painted to simulate grained wood, which contained some poor clothing and the gimcrack rosewood whatnot, relic of the triumphs of early married gentility, and on which still stood a dusty ornament off a wedding-cake and a cheap desk, the receptacle of all her treasures. She had not opened it for a week or two, she remembered, and wondered what she had done with the key.

Of course. It was in the crock on the mantelpiece. And in a moment she was fitting it, with trembling fingers, into the lock.

What

What . . . what was this? The key did not turn. Like lightning the terrible thought seized her. The lock had been tampered with. Good God! *what she most feared, then, was true!* Sleeping on the same floor, her son had access to the room at all times. No one in the house would bar his entrance at any hour of the day when she was away at her work, and it was while she had been away at her work in distant parts of London that the mischief had certainly been wrought. The desk was broken open; her watch, the half-sovereign she had hidden in the little wash-leather case which held it, the locket containing the coloured portrait of her husband, her mother-in-law's old-fashioned Swedish ring, the half-dozen krone and two-krone pieces, all were gone!

No one but her son could have taken the things, for no one but her son knew where she hid the key of her room when she locked it up on going out for the day. It was in an inaccessible chink in the rotten boards of the passage which flanked her door, and was covered not only by a loose piece of the woodwork but by the mat she had placed there some years later to keep out the draughts of an exceptionally bitter winter. The boy, when a little fellow, had always insisted on hiding the key for her whenever they had to leave the house, and found it again with delighted chucklings on their return. Yes, certainly her son knew——

The thought almost choked her. The secret of the missing brooch, the missing sovereign, his long absence, all was made clear. She knew now that while he had money he would not work. Had he not run away from two excellent situations, one after another, when he was little more than eighteen? Had he not been recovered from some disreputable den the year after, when she was three weeks searching the town? Yes. . . . On each occasion, she recollected, in looking back, she had missed money

money, though she had in no way suspected the thief at the time. It was, then, her earnings that he spent on the slouchers at tavern bars, on the riff-raff of both sexes that haunt street corners? There was no thrusting the miserable fact aside.

A convulsive shudder ran through her, the four walls of the little room which held her seemed to rock with a misery too great to put into words. All was dumb and confused as she sank on her knees on the floor, pressing her forehead against the hard rim of the wooden table. It was the only thing she was conscious of feeling physically for a time which might have been minutes or hours. The face of her son—flaccid, loose of lip, and shifty of eye, as she had caught sight of it in the street some fortnight ago—held her like some hideous phantasm. The very oath with which he had repelled her seemed to reiterate in her ears.

Why had she been sent this scourge? She had toiled for twenty years for this son, but now, for the first time in her life, an extraordinary gulf appeared to open between them. What was it, and how had it been compassed? A numbness was creeping up from her very feet. A curious lassitude followed the tumult of half an hour before. It was over. That sensation at least was definite. It was all over. There was the feeling as if she had been frozen. Her pulse hardly beat at all.

An hour—two hours passed. Then the sudden flare and stench of the guttering candle recalled her to her surroundings and made her crawl to the window, where the yellow light from a street lamp gave a faint gleam from the pavement below. She did not trouble to find another candle, but sat crouched on the ground, listlessly hearing the other lodgers climb the steep stairs and one after another go to bed. Where was her son? Or did she any longer actually care? Soon after all was silent in the house, and, as the draught from the window made her shiver, she dragged

dragged the worn shawl which acted as coverlet over her shoulders, and threw herself, all dressed as she was, on the bed.

She did not know how long she had slept, when a familiar sound startled her. It was the well-known noise of shuffling feet on the landing outside, accompanied by a thick voice muttering somewhat superfluous imprecations to the four walls.

Mrs. Reinhart held her breath to listen. It was her son! He had returned then; his money must be spent. What if just to-night he should force his way in? Surely that was his hand on the door handle? She could feel nothing but the throb of her heart the following moments in her intense anxiety to catch the next sound. It came after what seemed a laggard interval. A shuffle, another exclamation, then the grating of a match, and while her heart stood still, a chink of light flashed, steadied itself, and then fell through the long crack in one of the upper panels of her door. It formed a streak in the darkness which cut a clean shaft of light across the room, and for nine or ten seconds illumined with a lurid ray the empty desk still open on the table.

The woman on the bed set her teeth. A grim expression passed into her eyes. No one had dreamed, and least of all herself, that there was any latent force in her. Yet the very shape and form of the open desk seemed visible to Mrs. Reinhart long after there was silence in her son's room, and when the phantom tap of the skeleton tree on the window and the dull moan of the wind in the chimney were the only sounds which reached her ears. It haunted her as the grey light of the dawning smote the rain-stained window, and when the sparrows' noisy chirrup advertised that the gruesome night was at an end.

It was the signal for her to slip on to her feet. Where was the letter from Sweden? Yes; a glance at it showed her that it was the day the boat sailed. She would keep it by her for reference.

“Ask

"Ask for the *Edelweiss*," it said, and she repeated the name in an unconscious whisper as she stole noiselessly to and fro in the room. It would be futile, she knew, to leave anything in writing. In the time to come the broken-open desk, the empty room would effectually tell their own tale. One or two things from the gamboge-coloured box, a pair of thick boots which she did not put on, this was all she needed. Her bonnet and shawl were on the chair.

A few minutes later, when the sun rose majestically above the horizon, the effulgent light of a radiant spring morning touched the spare figure of a woman who emerged with a bundle from one of the houses and cautiously put-to the door. The face was pale, the movements agitated, but once outside, she did not look back. Her eyes were set, and seemed to look eagerly eastward as she vanished down the deserted street.

It was close on noon before it was ascertained that Mrs. Reinhart had thus unostentatiously set out on a journey. By that time, as a matter of fact, the outward-bound bark *Edelweiss* had slipped her moorings and the widow had started for her new home.