Behind the Shade

Arthur Morrison

The street was the common East End street—two parallels of brick pierced with windows and doors. But at the end of one, where the builder had found a remnant of land too small for another six-roomer, there stood an odd box of a cottage, with three rooms and a wash-house. It had a green door with a well-blacked knocker round the corner; and in the lower window in front stood a “shade of fruit”—a cone of waxen grapes and apples under a glass cover.

Although the house was smaller than the others, and was built upon a remnant, it was always a house of some consideration. In a street like this mere independence of pattern gives distinction. And a house inhabited by one sole family makes a figure among houses inhabited by two or more, even though it be the smallest of all. And here the seal of respectability was set by the shade of fruit—a sign accepted in those parts. Now, when people keep a house to themselves, and keep it clean; when they neither stand at the doors nor gossip across back-fences; when, moreover, they have a well-dusted shade of fruit in the front window; and, especially, when they are two women who tell nobody their business: they are known at once for well-to-do, and are regarded with the admixture of spite and respect that is proper to the circumstances. They are also watched.

Still, the neighbors knew the history of the Perkinses, mother and daughter, in its main features, with little disagreement: having told it to each other, filling in the details when occasion seemed to serve. Perkins, ere he died, had been a shipwright; and this was when the shipwrights were the aristocracy of the workshops, and he that worked more than three or four days a week was counted a mean slave: it was long (in fact) before depression, strikes, iron plates, and collective blindness had driven shipbuilding to the Clyde. Perkins had labored no harder than his fellows, had married a tradesman’s daughter, and had spent his money with freedom; and some while after his death his widow and daughter came to live in the small house, and kept a school for tradesmen’s little girls in a back room over the wash-house. But as the School Board waxed in power, and the tradesmen’s pride in regard thereunto waned, the attendance, never large, came down to twos and threes. Then Mrs. Perkins met with her accident. A dweller in Stidder’s Rents overtook her one night, and, having vigorously punched her in the face and the breast, kicked her and jumped on her for five minutes as she lay on the pavement. (In the dark, it afterwards appeared, he had mistaken her for his mother.) The one distinct opinion the adventure bred in the street was Mrs. Webster’s, the Little Bethelite, who considered it a judgment for sinful pride —for Mrs. Perkins had been a Church-goer. But the neighbors never saw Mrs. Perkins again. The doctor left his patient “as well as she ever would be,” but bedridden and helpless. Her daughter was a scraggy, sharp-faced woman of thirty or so, whose black dress hung from her hips as from a wooden frame; and some people got into the way of calling her Mrs. Perkins, seeing no other thus to honor. And meantime the school had ceased, although Miss Perkins

essayed a revival, and joined a dissenting chapel to that end.

Then, one day, a card appeared in the window, over the shade of fruit, with the legend "Pianoforte Lessons." It was not approved by the street. It was a standing advertisement of the fact that the Perkinses had a piano, which others had not. It also revealed a grasping spirit on the part of people able to keep a house to themselves, with red curtains and a shade of fruit in the parlor window; who, moreover, had been able to give up keeping a school because of ill-health. The pianoforte lessons were eight-and-sixpence a quarter, two a week. Nobody was ever known to take them but the relieving officer's daughter, and she paid sixpence a lesson, to see how she got on, and left off in three weeks. The card stayed in the window a fortnight longer, and none of the neighbors saw the cart that came in the night and took away the old cabinet piano with the channelled keys, that had been fourth-hand when Perkins bought it twenty years ago. Mrs. Clark, the widow who sewed far into the night, may possibly have heard a noise and looked; but she said nothing if she did. There was no card in the window next morning, but the shade of fruit stood primly respectable as ever. The curtains were drawn a little closer across, for some of the children playing in the street were used to flatten their faces against the lower panes, and to discuss the piano, the stuff-bottomed chairs, the antimacassars, the mantelpiece ornaments, and the loo table with the family Bible and the album on it.

It was soon after this that the Perkinses altogether ceased from shopping—ceased, at any rate, in that neighborhood. Trade with them had already been dwindling, and it was said that Miss Perkins was getting stingier than her mother—who had been stingy enough herself. Indeed, the Perkins demeanor began to change for the worse, to be significant of a miserly retirement and an offensive alienation from the rest of the street. One day the deacon called, as was his practice now and then; but, being invited no further than the doorstep, he went away in dudgeon, and did not return. Nor, indeed, was Miss Perkins seen again at chapel.

Then there was a discovery. The spare figure of Miss Perkins was seldom seen in the streets, and then almost always at night; but on these occasions she was observed to carry parcels, of varying wrappings and shapes. Once, in broad daylight, with a package in newspaper, she made such haste past a shop-window where stood Mrs. Webster and Mrs. Jones, that she tripped on the broken sole of one shoe, and fell headlong. The newspaper broke away from its pins, and although the woman reached and recovered her parcel before she rose, it was plain to see that it was made up of cheap shirts, cut out ready for the stitching. The street had the news the same hour, and it was generally held that such a taking of the bread out of the mouths of them that wanted it by them that had plenty was a scandal and a shame, and ought to be put a stop to. And Mrs. Webster, foremost in the setting right of things, undertook to find out whence the work came, and to say a few plain words in the right quarter.

All this while nobody watched closely enough to note that the parcels brought in were fewer than the parcels taken out. Even a hand-truck, late one evening, went unremarked: the door being round the corner, and most people within. One morning, though, Miss Perkins, her best foot foremost, was venturing along a near street with an outgoing parcel—large and triangular and wrapped in white drugget—when the relieving officer turned the corner across the way.

The relieving officer was a man in whose system of etiquette the Perkinses had caused some little disturbance. His ordinary female acquaintances (not, of course, professional) he was in the habit of recognizing by a gracious nod. When he met the minister's wife he lifted his hat, instantly assuming an intense frown, in the event of irreverent observation. Now he quite felt that the Perkinses were entitled to some advance upon the nod, although it would be absurd to raise them to a level with the minister's wife. So he had long since established a compromise: he closed his finger and thumb upon the brim of his hat, and let his hand fall forthwith. Preparing now to accomplish this salute, he was astounded to see that Miss Perkins, as soon as she was aware of his approach, turned her face, which was rather flushed, away from him, and went hurrying onward, looking at the wall on her side of the street. The relieving officer, checking his hand on its way to his hat, stopped and looked after her as she turned the corner, hugging her parcel on the side next the wall. Then he shouldered his umbrella and pursued his way, holding his head high, and staring fiercely straight before him; for a relieving officer is not used to being cut.

It was a little after this that Mr. Crouch, the landlord, called. He had not been calling regularly, because of late Miss Perkins had left her five shillings of rent with Mrs. Crouch every Saturday evening. He noted with satisfaction the whitened sills and the shade of fruit, behind which the curtains were now drawn close and pinned together. He turned the corner and lifted the bright knocker. Miss Perkins half opened the door, stood in the opening, and began to speak.

His jaw dropped. "Beg pardon—forgot something. Won't wait—call next week—do just as well;" and he hurried round the corner and down the street, puffing and blowing and staring. "Why the woman frightened me," he afterward explained to Mrs. Crouch. "There's something wrong with her eyes, and she looked like a corpse. The rent wasn't ready—I could see that before she spoke; so I cleared out."

"P'r'aps something's happened to the old lady," suggested Mrs. Crouch. "Anyhow, I should think the rent 'ud be all right." And he thought it would.

Nobody saw the Perkinses that week. The shade of fruit stood in its old place, but was thought not to have been dusted after Tuesday.

Certainly the sills and the doorstep were neglected. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday were

swallowed up in a choking brown fog, wherein men lost their bearings, and fell into docks, and stepped over embankment edges. It was as though a great blot had fallen, and had obliterated three days from the calendar. It cleared on Monday morning, and, just as the women in the street were sweeping their steps, Mr. Crouch was seen at the green door. He lifted the knocker, dull and sticky now with the foul vapor, and knocked a gentle rat-tat. There was no answer. He knocked again, a little louder, and waited, listening. But there was neither voice nor movement within. He gave three heavy knocks, and then came round to the front window. There was the shade of fruit, the glass a little duller on the top, the curtains pinned close about it, and nothing to see beyond them. He tapped at the window with his knuckles, and backed into the roadway to look at the one above. This was a window with a striped holland blind and a short net curtain; but never a face was there.

The sweepers stopped to look, and one from opposite came and reported that she had seen nothing of Miss Perkins for a week, and that certainly nobody had left the house that morning. And Mr. Crouch grew excited, and bellowed through the keyhole.

In the end they opened the sash-fastening with a knife, moved the shade of fruit, and got in. The room was bare and empty, and their steps and voices resounded as those of people in an unfurnished house. The wash-house was vacant, but it was clean, and there was a little net curtain in the window. The short passage and the stairs were bare boards. In the back room by the stair-head was a drawn window-blind, and that was all. In the front room with the striped blind and the short curtain there was a bed of rags and old newspapers; also a wooden box; and on each of these was a dead woman.

Both deaths, the doctor found, were from syncope, the result of inanition; and the better-nourished woman—she on the bed—had died the sooner; perhaps by a day or two. The other case was rather curious; it exhibited a degree of shrinkage in the digestive organs unprecedented in his experience. After the inquest the street had an evening's fame: for the papers printed coarse drawings of the house, and in leaderettes demanded the abolition of something. Then it became its wonted self. And it was doubted if the waxen apples and the curtains fetched enough to pay Mr. Crouch his fortnight's rent.