

JOHNNIE SINGS IN A STRANGE PLACE

JOHNNIE was fond of playing in front of the foundry gates, for he knew that his father was somewhere on the other side. Saturday was his great day. He spent the forenoon in scampering along the smooth pavement that ran round three sides of the foundry. Now and again he would cross the street and ask at the milk shop: "Will it be lang till the horn blaws." There was no sound in the world so grand to Johnnie as that.

One summer when his mother was alive he had been to the seaside, and at night in the little house where he lodged he could hear the sea dashing up on the shore; but even that did not thrill him like the roar of the horn, that woke him in the dark winter mornings and summoned his father to his work.

The machinery inside the foundry begins to slacken off a bit; the gates fly open. On and on the men come, and Johnnie's eyes gleam with pride when his father steps forward to the clerk at the window of the pay-box and claims his wages.

The afternoon is far on and wee Johnnie's father has not come home yet. When the last man came out of the foundry and the gates closed behind him, Johnnie ran on, in the hope of overtaking his father on the stair. He liked to take hold of his father's hand and mount the steps two at a time. The world was not so lonely then, and he did not miss his mother quite so much. For some Saturdays his father had kept true to the promise he had made to his dying wife, who said: "Ye'll no' let the drink get the better of ye. Ye'll no' let the drink mak' ye forget our wee Johnnie." "I ken my failin'," he said, "and if only ye had been spared to me, I wad hae been a better man; but I promise to take care o' wee Johnnie. God help me." And for weeks after the

neighbours spoke of his tenderness to the motherless bairn. These Saturdays were wonderful days in the life of wee Johnnie ; but they passed out of his life like a dream. He returned from the foundry gates one Saturday ; but no father waited to take him up the stair.

It was late at night when his father staggered home and Johnnie was ordered to bed with a curse. He crawled in and lay at the back with a heart like to break. He put the blankets over his head to say his prayers, and at last there came a smothered little cry : " Mother, Mother." Then he fell asleep.

But he got hardened. Something told him he must be brave, that he must watch his father. He found out where his father was going on Saturdays. The public-house was just on the other side of the street, and through the long afternoons till the darkness fell Johnnie sat and waited.

This afternoon he could not stay in. The singing of the men in the public-house was more attractive than usual, and he wanted to get nearer it. Some one had been giving " Annie Laurie," and Johnnie knew the air. When the singer sat down there was rapping of glasses on the table and great applause. This made Johnnie leave home, cross the street and stand outside the public-house door to hear as much of the singing as he could, and he wondered if his father would sing.

Darkness was beginning to fall and Johnnie was tired. A man came out to turn on the lights in the doorway, and when Johnnie asked him, " Wull you let me in to see my father ?" the man said, " All right, Johnnie, come after me."

The handle of the door was turned and the waiter appeared. " Wee Johnnie, gents," he said. With that he closed the door again, and Johnnie was inside. The chairman was taken aback, and the men looked up. They were angry at him, and he turned to his father. " Dinna be angry, father ; I was wearyin' at

hame, and when I heard the singing I wanted to come in. Ye'll no pit me oot, father? I'll just sit quiet and listen. The chairman said, "Not at all, Johnnie, we're no angry! We're glad to see you, my man; come up beside me. Why, you'll sing something to us." At this Johnnie's father put his arm round his boy and would have detained him; but the notion of singing to the company was so charming to Johnnie that he was at the chairman's side at once. "Gentlemen," the chairman cried, tapping on the table with his tumbler, "attention to Wee Johnnie's song."

Johnnie stood up on a seat, the faces of all the men were before him, but he did not feel put about. He began—and it was as if the angels had come down to drown the sad mirth of the public-house with one of their songs.

"There is a Happy Land, far, far away"—clear and sweet Johnnie's voice filled the back room, then it swelled out into the other compartments, and men who were drinking laid down their glasses. The bells ceased to ring. Waiters and customers at the counter looked round to listen.

"Come to that Happy Land, come, come away; Why will ye doubting stand, why still delay." It was a strange place for such a silence as prevailed, and many a one had better thoughts for Johnnie's pleading.

When he came to the last lines—"Bright in that Happy Land beams every eye"—his voice was so thrilling that all held their breath, and a woman bursting into tears slipped away from the counter into the street.

Johnnie never looked down as he went on singing. He seemed to be seeing his mother, and his eyes danced with real pleasure. When he finished he looked towards his father for a word of encouragement. His father's head was bent down; but Johnnie went forward and put his hand on his knee. "Ye're no angry, father?" Johnnie grew frightened, and looked

round upon the others—there was a strange look in their faces. The chairman felt he must say something, and rose to his feet: “Gentlemen,” he said, “we have reached the end of the programme, and this is likely to be the last concert of the season.” And he was right.

The men gave up their drinking concerts.

ANON (*adapted*).