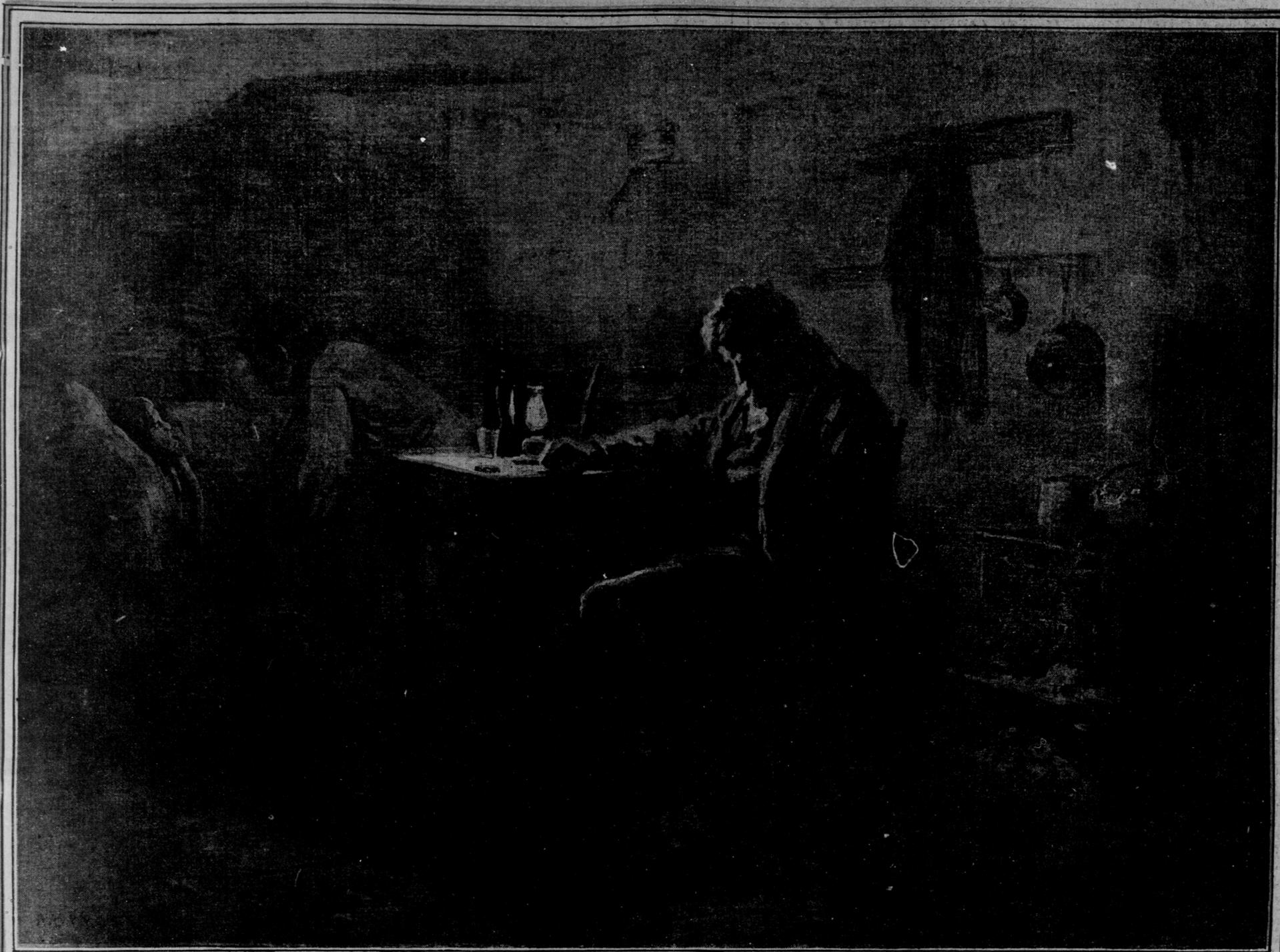


A Great Picture and Its Story *The Shadow of the Bottle*

By A. B. Frost



(Copyright by The North American Company.)

MINNIE was born in the shadow of the bottle. When she came into that small section of the world which was to be hers in common with the woman who bore her and the man who was her father, the bottle stood sentinel over the light that flung half the room into sharp relief and was mercifully veiled from the other half.

Her father gave to the occasion the honor of that fraction of his presence which was discernible in his big, strong hulk of a body and such remnants of his consciousness as the contents of the bottle had left active. They were very slight.

In those days, however, neither Minnie nor her mother had any notion of all the shadow meant to them—Minnie because nothing except her own infantile hunger and pains concerned her, and her mother because she was still confident in the strength of her youth and in the strength of her man.

Maggie Burns, when Bob was "sitting up" with her, sometimes wondered whether she could like him better if he wasn't so immune to liquor and were condemned to treat it more respectfully. She decided that she might; but, if it were a choice between the broad-shouldered, rollicking, stanch lover she had and some mean-spirited apology for a man who feared a drink and feared another man, she would cast her lot with the suitor whose nerve and muscles she could depend on.

What she took for granted she received, which is more than many another wife, more nicely particular in her choice, secures. Bob loved her, with a love of the kind that goes deeper than mere passion, deeper than the admiration for prettiness, deeper than pride in winning a belle and deeper than the foolish pride of man. Something in the nature which had molded her features into the expression that appealed to his eyes called to him across the gulf that always holds two apart, let them love as dearly as they may.

Perhaps, if she had known her power and if she had been less used to seeing men drink, she might have put a value on herself for which Bob would have paid the price. Other women have done that; and other men, for their sakes, have lived sober ever after. But she perceived in his indulgence only the fine freedom from weakness that was lauded as strength among the men she and her family knew; he was like their kind, and he was the best of their kind; need she ask for more?

Yet she did ask, as other women do. In marriage she responded more and more jealously to the real and profound love Bob felt for her, and she claimed of him more than her neighbors did of theirs. The jovial, absent tavern drinker, whose home was a place to eat and sleep in, was not for her; her husband should be a family man, known for his devotion to his wife and his own doorstep. She first realized what influence she had over him when he so readily gave up his nightly outing.

She would not have urged him to quit his liquor if she had thought of it. It was enough that a big, hearty, life-loving fellow like Bob should leave it all to be with her.

She was first apprehensive, almost frightened, when he drank his fill the night Minnie came. Then, of all times, he should have been himself for his wife's sake. As she lay there, her firstborn beside her and the nurse still vigilant at the bed's

foot, Bob's heavy breathing beyond the bottle's shadow seemed to be robbing her of all she had bargained for when she took him to be her man. Where was the strength she longed so much to feel in her desperate weakness? Where was the lover who should have gloried in his heart's responsive echoes of her pain, instead of drinking them to dumbness and leaving her fate in a hireling's hands?

It was a new, ineffaceable impression. It lingered with her, rankling and sore, until she was herself again. To be sure, a man must have his drink. Why not? But did she now have the man? Didn't the drink have him? Hadn't the drink always had him, only she was too blind to see it?

When these pitiless, dismaying questions drove home to her again and again, always with crueler force, Maggie began testing him. She tried urging him to take a little less; to go without for a night or two; even to resume the companionships of his bachelorhood, in the hope that a little liquor would go a longer way. Bob, for a time, condescended to argue with her; but, worsted, he took refuge in the sullen silence of insulted pride and offended love. He hadn't changed any. Seemed to him, he said, that since the baby came Maggie was getting cantankerous.

Then Maggie Burns realized how wholly he was lost to her, how wholly the bonds she had fancied were forged for eternity had given way to another, hideous shackle that seemed to be riveted on him for life. He did, he did surely, care more for the drink he swallowed in solitary, grim silence than for everything else in the world, her and Minnie included.

She came of fighting stock. Ruses and half-measures were not for her. If a friend turned foe, she would wait until she was sure of the enmity, but not one hour longer. She would fight this out now, in the open.

She planned a "talk" with him—one of those tragic mixtures of argument, persuasion and appeal of which wives hope so much and husbands tolerate so little. Even Bob, that old, familiar tugging at his heart undiminished while he alternately heard and replied, felt the male resentment of rebuke rising hot within him; and at last he flung out of the house, with the hour midnight, swearing he'd show her what a real drunkard could be. She had attempted the miracle in which millions of other saints have failed; she could only tremble for the consequences of her rashness.

They came, always more appalling, always more disheartening. Bob quit the role of family man; quit, after a longer while, the role of steady working man; quit, therefore, that last yet most honored dignity of his rank, which is known as the virtue of the good provider. The drink had him.

Maggie knew it; the neighbors knew it; only little Minnie, merging from babyhood into girlhood, failed to understand what a father like him might mean. She, too, felt some strange, unfathomed call across the gulf of life—something that was more than the affection in ruins as unquestioningly as he had accepted her father in the pride of his manhood. To her, he was all that was grand and strong and kind. She hungered for him, and told him so in the frank prattle of childhood and, even in his warped, sodden mind, to her appeals that he stay at home

with her, there attached no suspicion that her mother had inspired them. Maggie, in her harshly learned lessons of what a man can become, sometimes wondered whether he did not think she coached the girl; but she did him injustice. There still remained, under the ruin of the man, the nature that knew and responded to love's pleading.

That was how Bob became the family man again—a mockery and a shame upon the home-lover he once had been. Between his wife and him there had grown up a trace of grim forbearance, as though she would consent to live with him, while his presence dishonored her; and he would live with her, although every glance annoyed him. Minnie was the mutual friend—no bond, no source of union, simply the holder of loves that were her own, sharing them with neither.

When sleep came to her, it always came in the bottle's shadow; at first, while she lay alone, staring up at wall and ceiling, making child pictures in the semidarkness, and hours afterward with her mother by her side, resting heavily, the body wearied with the unceasing toil of the day. Beyond the bottle, in the glare of the lamp, her father sagged sodden in his chair, his day of tiresome idleness and dulled brain leaving him fit only for the unconsciousness which is miles from honest sleep. By devious ways and means, he still managed to achieve that marvel of the drunken loafer—the unerring supply of liquor which kept him loafing and drunk.

When, after one of those periods of bright eyes and brilliantly colored cheeks which mothers dread with a fear that makes them tremble, Minnie fell sick, her father, for the first time in years, showed real concern over what was happening within his ken. He seemed to miss, in the narrow limits of the room, the breath of affection that had made it endurable. Maggie, in the first, horrified realization of diphtheria, drove the iron home into his dulled, resentful soul.

"You and your bottle," she told him, "between you, you've killed her. She's lived in its black shadow ever since she was born, and she's never had enough good food since she was a baby to let her fight this through. If you'd been half the man I loved when I married you, we'd not be here now, where every dirty disease lies waiting around for its chance to kill some mother's child. Get out; get away; stay away. Leave me to save her if I can. I don't want you here to cripple me when the doctors lock us in."

He went, and the doctors locked them in. But he returned and, with a graveness that disarmed opposition, asserted his right to enter his own home.

Within Maggie met him with a glance of mingled hope and anxiety. Somehow—she did not try to guess—he might have secured money; it would be potent in aid at this time of need.

But all he did was to set down the bottle he had managed to fill afresh. Whatever his love for his child, it had not done more for him than to inspire in his sodden brain the resolve to be there, drunk, while she died, as he had been there, drunk, when she was born. The mother turned from him with black hatred in her heart.

Night fell, and the bottle's shadow lay across the bed and loomed to wall and ceiling. The sick child seemed to be summoning her strength for some supreme effort, while her father,

only part of his senses gone because he had been economizing his supply, sprawled in the chair, dully battling behind closed eyes between his craving for the full drunkenness he was used to and the faltering desire to save what remained for the next day.

"Daddy!" the choking little voice called to him from the bed.

He started up. He had known all along that it needed only a step of his to bring his wife flying at him in defense of the child against his drunken awkwardness. But when Minnie called to him, it would be different.

"Daddy," whispered the child, "see my nice tombstone on the wall? That shadow there! When I die, won't you buy me one with a round top like that?"

He turned unseeing eyes to the wall, then to his wife. "Oh, it's there," she told him bitterly. "It's been there all her life. It's the shadow your bottle makes. It's been over both of us, and you, too, as long as I can remember. Promise it to her. It's the only thing you'll ever have the chance to give her now."

The man did not answer. He lurched back to the chair and drew the bottle to him—carefully, lest he disturb the lamp. He gazed at it a while, then rose and raised the window.

The watcher without was alert. "Nothing comes out here," he warned. "Not even good whiskey?" said Bob. "Just throw it away, if you don't want it."

A hand reached up, and the bottle passed on. The window closed. Minnie's father turned to her, with the look in his face his wife recalled from the years when he was master of himself whatever he drank.

"Minnie, child," he said, "you shall have your nice, round-topped stone as soon as you're ready for it. But wouldn't you like to get well and have a big dollie instead?"

"Do you mean it, Bob—all of it?" her mother asked him, with eyes that seemed to shine in responsive courage and hope. "Every last word of it," he answered, "if we pull her through."

He strode forward and caught Maggie's hand, as she turned to the sickbed.

"And if we don't, too," he added. "But we will, Maggie, won't we?"

"I can't tell. I don't believe I could; but you may. I'm her mother; but, Bob, she's always been your child."

Was it that mysterious bond which saved her? Did Minnie's father, out of the strength of his regained manhood, uruse into the child who loved him some of the life that was his? The doctor, when he heard the story and saw how his patient had improved, did not scoff. Minnie's mother did not scoff. And as for Minnie herself, when she was well again, she told them: "I know I used to like that old shadow; but I felt better just as soon as it went away. And I like my daddy ever so much better now, too."

"So does your mother, Minnie, dear," said Maggie happily. "And so does your daddy, dear," said her father.

But he looked pretty grim as he said it.

PHILIP CAMPBELL