CHAPTER 5

Unforgiven

Drunken Mothers in
Hesba Stretton’s Religious Tract Society and
Scottish Temperance League Fiction

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The most popular Religious Tract Society (RTS) writer of children’s fiction in the High Victorian period, the prolific Hesba Stretton, often wrote of the desperate wanderings of outcasts in England’s industrial cities of Manchester, Liverpool, and—most often—London. Stretton is known primarily as the advocate of poor urban children in both her life and her art. She was the friend of Dickens, and—in company with the great philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts and others—she campaigned in support of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. In her urgent concern for England’s children, whom she viewed as its most vulnerable citizens, Stretton constructed a corollary narrative to her stories of victimized children that focused upon negligent, often

1 See Butts and Garrett, especially the introductory chapter by Fyfe, “A Short History of the Religious Tract Society,” 13–35. For an excellent review of this recent book, see Sattaur.

2 See Cutt’s chapter “Hesba Stretton: Her Life and Legend” in her Ministering Angels: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Writing for Children (Cutt 115–31) for the most thorough discussion of Stretton’s life. See also Bratton, Demers (1991), Dickins, and Rickard. Rickard’s article builds upon Cutt’s portrayal of the activist, shrewd, intelligent Stretton as opposed to the saintly figure of the children’s book writer enshrined in “legend.” Rickard provides a fresh view of Stretton’s toughness in negotiating with her publishers at the Religious Tract Society (RTS). See also Rickard’s chapter on Stretton in Butts and Garrett, “‘A Gifted Author’—Hesba Stretton and the Religious Tract Society,” 104–15, in relation to Stretton’s dealings with the RTS.

3 See Hendrick 26.
drunken, and morally corrupt mothers. It is this cultural narrative of the oppressive drunken mother that I wish to examine.

Hesba Stretton, born Sarah Smith in Wellington, Shropshire, on July 27, 1832, was the third daughter of Benjamin Smith, a bookseller and stationer in the New Street who later became the first postmaster of Wellington, and of Anne Bakewell Smith, “a strict and notably intelligent Methodist.”

“Hesba Stretton” is a name she adopted in 1858, with “Hesba” made up from the initials of her five siblings, while “Stretton” she took from the beloved town All Stretton, where her younger sister Anne had a house. She published her first story, “The Lucky Leg,” at twenty-seven, in Dickens’s *Household Words*, and thereafter became both a friend and a regular contributor to both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. By the end of the 1860s, Hesba Stretton became the most important writer for the Religious Tract Society, the highly successful publisher of Christian Evangelical works. The profits from RTS tracts, novels, children’s stories, and magazines supported the Society’s worldwide missionary work. She never married, moving to Manchester in 1863, where she worked for a short time as a governess. It was in Manchester that Stretton heard the passionate sermons of George MacDonald, author and Congregationalist minister, and of William Gaskell, the minister of Cross Street Chapel, husband of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. In Manchester Stretton witnessed the terrible conditions of street children that she documented in her best-selling novel *Pilgrim Street: A Manchester Tale* (1867). Soon afterward, Stretton and her younger sister Elizabeth, her lifelong companion, moved to London, where they eventually settled after extensive continental travel. Hesba Stretton died on October 8, 1911, and was eulogized in *Sunday at Home*, the evangelical magazine that in 1866 published her most famous novel, *Jessica’s First Prayer*.

Stretton wanted to make middle-class people aware of the dire state of England’s poor urban children. She was determined to call both her middle- and working-class readership to good works through an appeal to their Christian faith. She attacked Victorian social institutions and the hypocrisies of the moneyed classes—the prison system (*In Prison and Out*), the slum courts (*Pilgrim Street*), aristocratic owners of gin palaces (*Her Only Son*), and fashionable society churches (*Jessica’s First Prayer*), and she called for protective legislation for children in prisons, in circuses, on the

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4 See Demers, “Sarah Smith.”
5 Again, see Rickard, “A Gifted Author.”
6 Ibid. 105–6.
7 Again, see Demers, “Sarah Smith.”
8 See especially Cutt.
streets—and in the home. Stretton was instrumental in the establishment of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (LSPCC) in 1884; she was on its executive board for ten years, and she generously donated to the organization. Stretton also campaigned for the 1889 Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, later known as the Children’s Charter.10 Stretton’s portrayals of sottish mothers were a distinct feature of several of the cautionary tales she wrote for the evangelistic “publishing phenomenon” (Butts 7) that the Religious Tract Society had become by the 1860s and 1870s and for the Scottish Temperance League.

In order to understand the force of Stretton’s “drunken mother” narrative for both her middle-class and newly literate working-class readers of *Sunday at Home*11 and other evangelical and temperance journals and novels, the context of the “drunken mother” narrative within the larger “child victim” narratives of Stretton and other Victorian novelists needs to be clarified. Although a number of the books I discuss were written for children or newly literate adults (*Jessica’s First Prayer, Little Meg’s Children, Lost Gip*), they were often read aloud in the family circle. Stretton was an early contributor to the “street arab” genre of fiction—as the recent *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literatures* states, “use of the subject in children’s

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9 Again, see especially Cutt and Rickard, “A Gifted Author,” on Stretton’s involvement in the child protection movement. Rickard writes specifically about Stretton’s financial donations to the LSPCC on page 231 of “Living by the Pen.” For information on the struggle to effect child protection laws, the Web site of the NSPPC is a good place to start: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/whatwedo/aboutthenspcc/historyofnspcc/historyofnspcc_wda33149.html. You can download their booklet, *The History of the NSPPC*, which details the heroes of this struggle: the Liverpool banker Thomas Agnew, who founded the Liverpool Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1883, after a trip to New York during which he was impressed with New York’s child protection society; the Reverend Benjamin Waugh, one of the first secretaries and the first director of the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children when Queen Victoria became its patron in 1889 and it was renamed the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; the Reverend Edward Rudolf, the other inaugural secretary of the Society; and Lord Shaftesbury, inaugural president.

10 The Scottish Temperance League was formed in 1844 in Falkirk for the purpose of “promoting the virtues of abstinence through associational culture” (Maver 159). Maver’s groundbreaking study provides fascinating details about the lives of pioneer temperance campaigners like John Dunlop. See also Winskill 28. See http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/airgli/airgli0128.htm, Glasgow University Digital Archive, for a less detailed history of the Scottish Temperance League.

11 *Sunday at Home* was one of a number of “Sunday magazines.” Others included *Good Words* (later *Sunday Magazine*, edited by Benjamin Waugh), *The Day of Rest*, and *Leisure Hour*. These magazines were intended primarily for Sunday family reading. Chris Baggs discusses the availability of these and other magazines to women not of the upper classes in his fascinating article describing public library reading in “ladies’ reading rooms” (Baggs 2005).
books began only in the 1860’s”—and she did not elide the darker realities of slum life even when her primary reader was ostensibly a child. As Suzanne Rickard says of Stretton, “She managed to write about unmarried mothers, teenage prostitutes, abusive parents, exploitative employers, child death, drunkenness, homelessness, and other issues which were entirely sensational. Indeed, in other hands, the topics may have been almost controversial to treat in print. All the publicity given to Hesba’s writing [by the RTS] stressed ‘its purity of tone and high purpose.’” Often citing parliamentary bluebooks as evidence, Stretton tells the stories of juvenile offenders (In Prison and Out), circus performers (An Acrobat’s Girlhood), young factory workers (David Lloyd’s Last Will), drunkards’ children (Her Only Son, Jessica’s Mother, Lost Gip), child domestic workers (Cassy), and street waifs of every description (Jessica’s First Prayer, Pilgrim Street, A Thorny Path, Bede’s Charity, Alone in London). Some of Stretton’s fictions make an overt connection between upper-class capitalist greed and lower-class misery—for instance, the aristocratic ownership of gin palaces that is criticized in the temperance novel Her Only Son. Stretton’s focus is upon portraying the horrific circumstances of the poor, and most particularly, the suffering of the poorer classes’ children. Her social critique works through eliciting sympathy for the innocent children caught in the web of abject poverty.

In this concern for the child victim in her fiction, Stretton is in the mainstream of Victorian novelists, as Laura Berry argues in The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel: “At an uncertain point in the nineteenth century, the welfare of the family, especially the state of the child, was intertwined with debates about the welfare of the state in England” (1). From Dickens’s orphaned Oliver in Oliver Twist (1837–38) and Jo the Crossing Sweeper in Bleak House (1851–52) to Stretton’s tales of suffering children in the 1860s and 1870s, the victimized child is a crucial feature in Victorian “social problem” novelists’ critique of the English nation. In centering her

12 See The Norton Anthology of Children’s Literatures: The Traditions in English (Zipes 2005), 533. The Anthology includes excerpts from Jessica’s First Prayer.
13 Rickard, “A Gifted Author” 112.
14 “No one can read [this writer’s work] without being a wiser and better man or woman,” declared the critic in the Court Circular and Court News (circa 1870), qtd. in Rickard, “A Gifted Author,” 112. I personally could not stop reading this compelling, poignant novel that describes the hardships for England’s textile factory workers during the American Civil War.
15 See Berry, whose work is concerned with the increasing dominance of the narrative of the victimized child in nineteenth-century England: “This book examines the intense nineteenth-century fascination with victimized children to show how novels and reform writings authoritatively reorganize the ideas of self and society as narratives of childhood distress” (3).
“drunken mother” narratives on the most negligent of lower-class mothers, Stretton was performing cultural work that partly displaced middle-class responsibility and assuaged her middle-class readers’ guilt for the child victim figures in these novels, as she differentiated her hardworking, pious, respectable working-class readers from these criminalized lower-class maternal figures. Simultaneously, Stretton called both her middle-class and working-class readership to action through Christian duty.

The “drunken lower-class mother” narrative is a polemical construction. This assertion is upheld by social histories of the second half of the nineteenth century, which consistently document the much greater adverse effect of paternal drinking upon poor children; fathers took the family’s scant funds to the pub, away from the mother’s allotment of money available for the children’s food and clothing.16 Stretton’s narratives of the morally contaminating drunken mother are all the more powerfully memorable because Stretton in fact often depicts mothers of the poorer classes as admirable, self-sacrificing women who simply cannot cope with the relentless poverty that afflicts them (Cassy, A Thorny Path, Bede’s Charity). As Nancy Cutt says of Stretton: “Twenty years before Charles Booth, she was pointing out that destitution did not necessarily result from idleness, extravagance, or vice, but was all too often the consequence of illness or lack of opportunity” (Cutt 133). Stretton’s portrayals of strong if beleaguered poor mothers, based upon her own well-documented immersion in the East End, are confirmed by the remarkable work of historian Ellen Ross in Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918, in which the extreme self-starvation and the hard work of mothers in the poorest classes in London are examined.17

The drunken mother narrative is inescapably located in a complex Victorian gender ideology as well as in the social history of real mothers of the poor and “very poor” classes with whom Stretton was familiar. While scholarship has documented that mothers were sacred figures in middle-class Victorian gender ideology,18 several important critical studies have also persuasively argued that middle-class women were not—in life or in

16 Ellen Ross writes, “The poor man’s drink was at the expense of his family’s food and sometimes his own. . . . Wives’ drinking could also, of course, be a drain on income, but arrests for drunkenness, pub watchers’ figures for the proportions of women entering pubs, and family budgets show that married women spent much less on alcohol than their men-folk did” (Ross 43).
17 For documentation of Stretton’s involvement in the East End, see especially Rickard 1996. Ross writes of these poor mothers, “I can’t see them want’ was the mothers’ natural reply when well-wishing social workers urged them to eat more of the family food” (Ross 55).
18 See especially Gorham, Kennard, Rees, Branca, Davidoff, and Vicinus.
literature—such angelic moral teachers.\textsuperscript{19} However, from a middle-class perspective—and in the view of the lower classes emulating middle-class values—the dereliction of the mother was, if not the profaning of the sacred, then the subversion of the expected and conventional family moral structure. The mother was supposed to be the staunch moral center of the home sphere, the guardian of the domestic refuge from that fierce male sphere of business and politics. Middle-class anxieties about the lower-class family tended to center upon the mother, as Deborah Epstein Nord and Ginger Frost have pointed out.\textsuperscript{20} From the historical record, Ross and others have demonstrated that the mothers of the poorest classes in Victorian England were the crucial factor in the family’s physical, economic, and psychic success—and even survival.\textsuperscript{21} If the mother was sober, thrifty, and ingenious, the family had much better odds of remaining intact and viable. A mother who went to the pub regularly was likely to bring her family down with her when she fell into drunkenness and squalor—or worse.

According to both middle-class ideology and working-class social history, then, the one East End mother who could not be tolerated or forgiven is the drunk, a figure Stretton presents many times over as the enemy to her children’s welfare in a reiterative cautionary tale.\textsuperscript{22} Even the mother

\textsuperscript{19} See especially Langland, Shapiro, Newton, Auerbach, Vicinus, Thomson, and Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark.

\textsuperscript{20} See Nord, \textit{Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City}; Frost in this volume. My thanks to Professor Frost, both for her own work and for reminding me of Nord’s critique.

\textsuperscript{21} Ross, \textit{Love and Toil}: “In this era, without a reasonably competent adult woman or older daughter, households often ‘broke up,’ their members joining those of relatives or neighbors or entering the poor-law system with its cruel separation of spouses, parents, and children. . . . \textit{Love and Toil} maintains that family survival was the mother’s main charge among the large majority of London’s population who were poor or working class. . . . To mother was to work for and organize household subsistence” (8–9). On middle-class observers in the slums of London: “The ‘discovery’ of the mother was part of the general middle-class recognition that the poor had their own distinct culture. Mothers and their domestic needs were in many ways the key to the order and pattern that the observers began to find in the noisy, bustling streets of the East End. As orchestrators of household survival and arbiters of neighborhood morality, mothers were the figures around whom the working-class culture had coalesced” (22–23).

\textsuperscript{22} See especially Ross: “The work of a good wife was not exactly analogous to that of a good husband, for the woman had far less room for error. Sobriety, consistency, and at least some cleverness were built-in requirements for wives, and the absence of these qualities was much more likely to be noticed than their presence. After all, even the most drunken and neglectful husband usually had someone to take care of his home and children. Drinking (and therefore often heavy-pawning) wives were subject to literal battering by their husbands and to figurative battering by the poor-law, the COS, and other agencies. Mothers’ heavy drinking and their concomitant neglect and mismanagement of their infants figure in many Old Bailey cases, for their dereliction had dire consequences for their families” (71).
who committed infanticide was in many respects sympathized with rather than wholly condemned. When Stretton focuses on drunken mothers, they inevitably die in order that their children can be freed to live middle-class lives. These mothers are beyond the pale; they cannot be rescued from their degradation, and they never undergo conversion experiences—an unusual narrative pattern in an explicitly Christian text. Indeed, they are not even named in her stories, so they become generic—they are not vouchsafed interiority or individuality. Looked at from the perspective of the “degeneration” debates of the late Victorian era, the drunken mother represents a kind of devolution of the mother figure, the embodiment of fears about the regression of the species as well as the degraded citizenry of the State.23 Her fallenness from the pedestal of domestic goddess is nearly always associated with sexual fallenness as well: the drunken mother is associated with sexual impurity and prostitution, as in Jessica’s Mother, where the mother has been an actress, a mistress, and eventually a prostitute. Finally, the drunken mother is linked to the mother who commits infanticide, as in Lost Gip, in which the neighbors whisper darkly that the lost little girl Gip has really been murdered by her drunken mother, frequenter of the corner gin palace.24

Lost Gip, which first appeared in 1873 in the Sunday magazine The Day of Rest, concerns the travails of Sandy, a young slum dweller whose drunken mother has lost his beautiful, dark little “gypsy” sister. Sandy lives in a filty street in the East End, in a neighborhood where the gin palace is the center of activity, and “the door swings to and fro incessantly with the stream of men, women, and children passing in and out” (8). Sandy devotedly nurses his little sister Gip, who had been fed by his drunken mother

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23 See Maunder for insight into this argument on the connection between degeneracy fears and motherhood.
24 See Ross: “Infanticide among the working classes had been the subject of a journalistic and official panic in the 1860’s and early 1870’s, stimulated in part by a few spectacular mass murders by ‘baby farmers’ and in part by two energetic and crusading medical men who served in succession as coroners for Central Middlesex, which included the heavily servant-keeping districts of St. Marylebone and Paddington. . . . Although single parents were apparently much more likely to try to kill their infants than married parents were, official interest in stamping out infanticide among the poor coalesced in the 1890’s around the question of overlaying, or accidentally suffocating, babies sleeping in their parents’ bed. . . . In the 1908 Children Act, however, a piece of legislation incorporating many of the themes of the previous decade’s high-level discussions of infant welfare, a kind of criminal negligence theory of overlaying was adopted, and it became a penal offense if it happened after a parent had drunk alcohol” (187–89). See also Berry: “The mid-Victorian period saw the proliferation of a massive discourse about infanticide. Even in the absence of any persuasive evidence that infanticide was actually on the rise, reformers of all sorts wrote as if child murder were taking place not just daily, but hourly” (131).
“with more gin than milk.” All the babies before Gip have died despite Sandy’s care, but somehow, the brother/mother manages to keep his baby sister alive. Close narrative kin to Dickens’s Jo the Crossing Sweeper in *Bleak House*, who is told to “move on” or he will be arrested, Sandy is told by the police to go about his business, but as he says to his toddler sister, “Where are I to go, Gip?”

Significantly, Sandy and Gip’s mother is never given a name, and therefore seems to be intended as a kind of drunken lower-class Everywoman. In sharp contradiction to the middle-class ideal of the Angel in the House, she is always identified with the gin palace or spirit vault rather than the home, where she goes only to sleep off her last drunken bout. She begins Gip’s initiation into the world of the gin palace early on in the little girl’s life: “She swore at the child sometimes, but more often she took her inside, and poured the last drop or two of her glass of gin down Gip’s throat . . .” (20).

Gip’s mother not only teaches her little girl how to tipple—a role usually allotted in Victorian novels to dipsomaniac fathers, like Arthur Huntingdon in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—she also loses Gip when she is dead drunk. Sandy searches for his little sister for the rest of the story, a knight-errant on a Christian, brotherly quest. Only at the novel’s close does he find his adored Gip at Miss Murray’s Emigration Society for Children, based on Maria Rye’s organization. The polemics of Stretton’s text argue for the middle class as caretakers to the urban poor’s children.

Another strand of the narrative concerns a middle-class clergyman’s family fallen upon hard times who nevertheless take Sandy in as a surrogate son. Their own crippled son, the Christ-like, doomed John Shafto, becomes the wandering boy’s dear friend and serves as middle-class double to Sandy, who will ultimately take his place. Meanwhile, Sandy fears his drunken mother’s return; it is his “secret dread, which haunted him day by day as he went to and fro about his work. . . . It was a great terror . . . whenever he had to pass the swinging doors of the gin-palace . . . a den of some ravenous beast of prey, lying in wait to devour him. . . . ‘Lord,’ he said often in his prayers, ‘let mother be lost always, and never be found again; but please find little Gip for me soon!’” The child’s prayers that

25 Brontë: “So the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma, and learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him” (chap. 39).

26 See Cutt 150, and note 34; Diamond for the most thorough biography of this feminist philanthropist. Rye, a member of the “Langham Place” group, devoted her life to helping women and girls emigrate to Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand. After 1869 Rye focused upon the emigration of “gutter-children” to Canada.
the mother “be lost always” are chilling if wholly understandable—more
terrible still if “lost” signifies the larger biblical meaning of “strayed from
the path to salvation” or even “damned”; in this text, however, narrative
sympathy is entirely on the side of the innocent child.

Despite Sandy’s wish, like a ghost in a gothic tale or the predator in a
nightmare, the “ravenous beast of prey” that is Sandy and Gip’s drunken
mother returns for a brief moment after Sandy finds his little sister. The
children’s mother wants to claim them so that Sandy can provide her again
with drink money from his street work as a fuse-boy selling matches.
Sandy can think only how “he could save little Gip and himself,” but the
mother suddenly dies before he must escape. There is no place for the con-
version of the drunken lower-class mother in this narrative. Her death
scene is juxtaposed to so many deaths of angelic middle-class mothers in
Victorian fictions: this drunken mother is dead among the tombstones in
the churchyard, reduced to a frozen “figure,” an “it” not only dematern-
alized but dehumanized: “they were quite close to the figure, and it did not
move, though the wind ruffled the ragged shawl a little.”

When the Shaftos emigrate to a farm in Canada, the drunken mother
is left in the Old Country’s earth. Sandy decides not to tell Gip about her
mother—“don’t let little Gip ever know!”—so the mother’s existence is
erased from the daughter’s memory. Finally, in Canada Sandy and Gip live
happily in a pastoral landscape, in “a loghouse of their own, within sound
of the lapping of the waves of the Lake Huron”—in an Eden without the
most fallen of Eves, the drunken mother.

Gip’s dark skin and hair—“Gip” is short for “Gypsy”—complicate this
narrative even further. If Gip is somehow the progeny of the nameless
drunken mother and a foreign father, then she is twice Other, an impover-
ished little girl of mixed race. Significantly, dark Gip is about to be shipped
out to Canada with lots of other poor children before she is rescued by
Sandy and the Shafto family and emigrates with them. The children of
the poor become exports, a “product” too costly to keep in England.

Reconstituted families occur in almost all of Stretton’s fictions (as in many

27 Peggotty relates Clara’s death to David Copperfield: “Let my dearest boy go with us
to our resting-place,’ she said, ‘and tell him that his mother, when she lay here, blessed
him not once, but a thousand times . . . she . . . gave me such a patient smile, the dear!—so
beautiful!—” Thereafter, David recalls the childish, loving, but irresponsible Clara as an
angel-mother: “In her death she winged her way back to her calm untroubled youth, and
cancelled all the rest” (chap. 7).

28 Nancy Cutt argues that in Lost Gip, Stretton “adds to the temperance theme a plea for
adoption of orphans, and drew flattering attention to the work of Maria Rye, who, like Miss
Macpherson, Dr. Barnardo, William Quarrier, and others, worked to settle slum orphans in
Canadian, Australian, or New Zealand homes” (150).
of Gaskell’s and Dickens’s works), in which children and adults of different families end up as one new family united by Christ’s love. In this instance, the difficulty is perhaps that Stretton—like Elizabeth Gaskell at the close of *Mary Barton*, when her working-class family is relocated to an Edenic rural Canada—cannot truly imagine a place in England where such an anomalous family could thrive and prosper.

*Jessica’s First Prayer*, Stretton’s most famous and popular novel—a million and a half copies were sold in the years after its July 1866 publication in *Sunday at Home*—also features a terrifying drunken mother. Like Sandy’s mother in *Lost Gip*, Jessica’s mother does not have a name. She is an actress who has once apparently been very pretty and popular in the theater, but who is now a prostitute addicted to gin. She seems once to have been a gentleman’s mistress; she claims that she “rode in my carriage once, man, I can tell you” (*Jessica’s Mother* 80). Jessica’s mother’s story is, then, a version of the Victorian fallen woman narrative.

Therefore, Jessica’s story is the tale of a fallen woman’s child, a daughter saved by kindly middle-class men who are alternatives to those who exploit and pay her mother. Early on in the novel, Jessica runs from her violent mother to Daniel Standring, the chapel-keeper who has fed her from his coffee stall. She befriends not only Daniel but the chapel’s minister and his two daughters. Ultimately, Jessica is adopted by Daniel, who “rented a little house for himself and his adopted daughter to dwell in . . . [he] was well pleased that there was nobody to interfere with his charge of Jessica” (54).

Jessica’s mother’s utter unworthiness is juxtaposed to the pathetic innocence and loving nature of Jessica herself. When the Methodist minister—who also does not have a name, in his case a marker of his representative position, not his character—offers Jessica some middle-class opportunities for education, churchgoing, and good, sturdy clothing, Jessica responds that her mother is “[o]n a spree . . . and she won’t be home for a day or two. She’d not hearken to you, sir. There’s the missionary came, and she pushed him down the ladder, till he was nearly killed. They used to call mother the vixen at the theater, and nobody durst say a word to her” (38).

29 Consider Gaskell’s *Ruth*, in which the Reverend Thurston Benson and his sister Faith take in the fallen Ruth and her son Leonard, whom they continue to treat as a son after Ruth’s death in a fever; “Libby Marsh’s Three Eras,” in which two lonely and bereaved women make a home together after the death of the boy they both love; or Dickens’s *Bleak House*, in which John Jarndyce makes a home for Esther Summerson, Rick Carstone, Ada Clare, and Caddy Jellyby, to none of whom he is related by blood.

30 A good essay could be written on Hesba Stretton’s interpretations of the British Empire; for example, in *Bede’s Charity*, a poor old country woman lost in the city views the West End parks as foreign lands.
The actors name Jessica’s mother as the animal she is, although Stretton shows her to be worse than a “vixen” in being a mother who is unnatural. While Jessica’s simple response to the Word of God draws Daniel and the minister’s family to her aid, Jessica’s mother abandons her when the child is seriously ill. Symbolically, Daniel finds Jessica in a stable, praying: “Our Father,” said the little voice, “please to send somebody to me, for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.” The earthly father, Daniel, responds to Jessica’s prayer and becomes a good Christian thereafter, as well as a maternalized father figure.

The stability of Jessica’s new middle-class life is still in danger from her drunken mother—who, it turns out, is still alive and now a street prostitute—a fact evident to adult readers of the novel. In *Jessica’s Mother*, the sequel to *Jessica’s First Prayer*, Jessica’s drunken mother returns—like the drunken mother in *Lost Gip*—a ghost that will not be buried. She appears on Daniel’s doorstep one night, “the figure of a person, which looked more like a heap of rags, crouching upon his door-sill. . . . The miserable creature before him shocked every sense of decency and propriety . . .” (75, 90). Even the innocent, loving Jessica herself cannot get her mother to reform. Daniel knows that “there was little hope . . . of a woman so enslaved by drunkenness being brought back again to religion and God” (97).

Yet Daniel does decide to emulate Christ. He provides for Jessica’s mother although he abhors her and thinks she has “no more claim upon him than any other of the thousands of lost men and women who thronged the streets of London . . .” (100–101). When he sees her in those streets, Daniel follows her, and at last views her as “a strange dark figure on one of the great beams stretching over the river . . .” (112). Daniel demonstrates both the courage of his Old Testament namesake and the self-sacrifice of the true Christian when he suffers mortal wounds trying to rescue Jessica’s mother. However, in an iconographic fallen woman death, she drowns, a suicide.

As narrative reward for his self-sacrifice, Daniel has a perfect Christian death, in stark contrast to the symbolic fallen woman’s drowning of Jessica’s mother. His death is depicted in a prolonged deathbed scene in which he is surrounded not only by Jessica, but by the fashionable chapel-goers for whom he has opened pews each Sunday. His death is an example of the “good death” that Gerhard Joseph and Herbert Tucker write of as one

31 Again, this scene is reminiscent of *David Copperfield*, when the child Little Em’ly runs out on a “jagged timber” overlooking the sea at Yarmouth and nearly falls, which David recalls in retrospect, after the adult Emily has indeed become a fallen woman (chap. 3).

32 See especially Auerbach for the iconographies of the drowned fallen woman in Victorian literature and painting.
of the “master narratives” of Victorian death. The now recovered minister comes to Daniel’s deathbed to pray with him, and he adopts Jessica as his own daughter when Daniel dies. The minister moves to the country, where he is “a man of calmer happiness than before” who preaches to a “simple congregation simple truths” (121). The city’s fashionable chapel and well-to-do congregation are left behind. And Jessica the street urchin becomes a middle-class child in another reconstructed pastoral. As in Lost Gip, the taint of the urban drunken mother can only be purified, finally, within a middle-class home in an Edenic landscape.

This conclusion to the “drunken mother” narrative can be viewed as Stretton’s call for middle-class responsibility through a sense of Christian duty: we are all a part of God’s family. In stories that were read out loud by middle-class and working-class parents to their own children, this ending must have been reassuring. From another perspective, however, the drunken mother narrative seems to mask a fear of the unwashed, contaminating, possibly immoral poor that cannot be expressed through the figure of the innocent child victim. Concomitant with this fear is the paternalistic suspicion that without direct middle-class intervention in the poor family, the poor will not survive. In fact, what the poor needed above all was better wages, as historians of the nineteenth century have documented. What the narrative of the drunken mother offers instead is a repository for blame and a fissure through which the lower-class family can be divided, with the uniting figure as the middle-class parent, in part symbolic of the State.

In order fully to contextualize the drunken mother narrative in Stretton’s fiction, we can turn first to her plethora of lower-class mothers who are not drunks. Among these stories, the tales of the convicted thief Rachel Trevor in The Storm of Life (1876) and the beleaguered Hagar in A Thorny Path (1879)—who abandons her blind old father and little girl Dot when they all are starving—bear examination as counternarratives. In The Storm of Life, the passionate Rachel Trevor begins her journey out of prison life with the chaplain’s loving words—“Thou God seest me”—inscribed in his dying letter to her, as a talisman against evil, and in particular against the stealing that landed her in prison. After Rachel trudges through the snow to the workhouse to reclaim her child Rosy, the

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33 See Joseph and Tucker.
34 See, for instance, Ross.
35 The Storm of Life appeared in Good Words in 1876. It was published in a single volume by Henry S. King & Co. in 1876 and was also published in volume form by the RTS. A Thorny Path first appeared in Sunday at Home and was then published in a single volume by the RTS. See Rickard, “A Gifted Author” 115, and Cutt 208–10.
mother realizes the cost of her own crimes to her pretty child when her “merry laughing little darling” has become a reticent, “thin, long-armed girl of seven, with short clipped hair, and dull pale face. . . . This fright-ened-looking child had her face half hidden by an ugly green shade over her eyes, and she crept about carefully like one nearly blind.” From that moment, Rachel heroically protects her beautiful little girl from her criminal father. Rachel becomes the ideal housekeeper of the small home she shares in London with an elderly couple who have taken her in and whose own daughter has died: “Never had the house been so clean, or his wife’s room so spotlessly white. Never had there been so little money needed for housekeeping. Rachel baked and cooked, and washed and mended, as if the house were her own. It was her home.” Rachel is identified with the respectable working classes who aspired to middle-class ideals of serene domesticity and “cleanliness as godliness.” Significantly, Rachel, now an “angel in the house,” is not only pure, but disseminates purity, making the wife’s room “spotlessly white.”

Rachel, in contrast to Stretton’s drunken lower-class mothers, is portrayed as a heroic, self-sacrificing maternal figure. When her husband Trevor returns to London and accidentally meets up with Rachel, she separates herself from Rosy in order to protect her daughter from Trevor’s plans to prostitute her: “It would be dangerous to let one of Trevor’s comrades even see his little daughter.” She refuses to steal for her husband and his cronies, and he punishes her by locking her in a garret to stitch for him.36 Rachel’s health is broken by her malnourishment and ill-treatment, but she survives her tormentor long enough to find her daughter once again and to die in her presence, a Christian deathbed scene that is witnessed not only by Rosy but by her surrogate father, the pastorally named Sylvanus, the worker who took Rachel and Rosy into his care in the wretched city. In this Christian death forbidden to the drunken lower-class mother, the former thief Rachel allies herself to her biblical namesake, Jacob’s beloved wife, favored of the Lord. Stretton’s Rachel calls upon the Lord as she dies: “‘Father!’ she cried, in a tone of amazement and of great joy. . . . The storm of life was ended for her, and already she was in the haven where she would be.” Rachel—like Daniel in Jessica’s Mother—is allowed a good, middle-class Victorian deathbed scene.

A Thorny Path begins with a shocking scene in which the recently widowed, destitute Hagar, carrying her new infant, abandons her blind old

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36 This dark Rapunzel-like Christian fairytale is inflected by Friedrich Engels’s *Condition of the Working Classes* in England in 1844, in which starving, impoverished seamstresses sew for their lives. See also Morse 27–73.
father and her little girl Dot in Kensington Gardens: “The moment was come at last when despair had gained full possession of her.”

Named for the biblical Hagar, mother of Ishmael, this poverty-stricken, desperate mother is immediately aggrandized in the Victorian reader’s mind—as is Rachel—by her biblical namesake. This Victorian Hagar is also a beleaguered mother, also a victim of oppression by the patriarchy, as the biblical Hagar of Genesis, Abraham’s concubine, suffered from the patriarch’s judgment that she and her son Ishmael should be cast into the desert wilderness. Like the biblical Hagar, this Victorian mother, too, will ultimately find some peace.

Almost at once, Hagar repents of her deed, but when she returns to the spot in Kensington Gardens where she left the old man and the little girl, they are gone. Hagar is so distressed that she runs into the street, right under the wheels of a passing cab. Her baby dies, but Hagar is rescued by a kindly young man, the railway guard Abbott, who is in the cab that hits Hagar in the foggy evening, as he hurries to see his own devout mother before she dies that same evening. Abbott chooses to have Hagar’s baby buried with his mother, signifying their union in the kingdom of heaven, and the equality of all children of God. Hagar tells Abbott that she has thought of drowning herself—but in this tale, as in others of women who are forlorn and even sexually fallen but not drunks, Hagar is saved from this fate. She is taken in by Abbott, who now owns his mother’s beautiful, orderly house—again, as in The Storm of Life, associated with maternal purity. Eventually, Abbott and Hagar fall in love with each other, despite her tragic story of betrayal. Unlike the patriarch Abraham who cast out his son Ishmael, Abbott does not condemn Hagar and her child, but instead ultimately succeeds in finding the long-lost daughter. Thus Stretton revises the Old Testament, the ultimate patriarchal narrative.

The wandering Ishmael figure of the novel is a Dickensian street urchin who names himself Don after a dog he likes. Don’s identification with a street dog is reminiscent of the scene in Bleak House in which the narrator comments upon Jo as having been taught less than the drover’s dog. This alignment indicates his cultural disposability, as Ivan Kreilkamp brilliantly

37 See Ross: “A much larger group of ‘bad’ wives, far larger than that of drinkers, were women who had ‘lost all hope,’ as the saying went, women who, to use Beatrice Potter Webb’s terms, were ‘very dirty and untidy’ or ‘untidy, incapable, and careworn,’ dragging themselves as best they could through their days and carrying out minimal domestic functions in a weary, depressed state. These symptoms could express a variety of underlying states: overwhelming fatigue, illness, depression, or rebellion” (71–72). Ross cites Potter Webb in her account book describing tenants in the Katharine Buildings, for which she was a rent collector from 1885 until 1889.

38 Chap. 16, “Tom-All-Alone’s”: 
argues in a recent essay (Kreilkamp). The abbreviated, nearly interchangeable names of these roaming street children—Dot and Don—suggest both their representativeness and their society’s refusal to allow them to inherit their full humanity—much less a stake in the lawful inheritance of worldly goods that requires a surname. Stretton creates a figure embodying Christ’s spiritual inheritance in the orphaned Don, who seems never to have had parents but is nevertheless a kind protector to little Dot.

The orphaned street arab Don is Stretton’s example to the neglectful society that has cast these children out to wander. The most poignant section of the narrative is a long sequence in which the two children are alone in London while Don slaves as an errand-boy, sacrificing his health to provide for his charge. He ultimately dies of starvation: “Those who heard of Don felt it to be an infamy to the greatest and richest city in the world, a Christian city, that one of its children should famish in its streets” (chap. 19, “A Shameful Verdict”). The maternalized Don is buried in the grave with Abbott’s mother and Hagar’s baby: “He had no name that they could put upon the headstone; but they added a new inscription to that already upon it, one which would remind them of him whenever they came to the spot: ‘He shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; and God shall wipe away all tears from his eyes’” (chap. 19). The inscription

A band of music comes and plays. Jo listens to it. So does a dog—a drover’s dog, waiting for his master outside a butcher’s shop, and evidently thinking about those sheep he has had upon his mind for some hours and is happily rid of. He seems perplexed respecting three or four, can’t remember where he left them, looks up and down the street as half expecting to see them astray, suddenly pricks up his ears and remembers all about it. A thoroughly vagabond dog, accustomed to low company and public-houses; a terrific dog to sheep, ready at a whistle to scamper over their backs and tear out mouthfuls of their wool; but an educated, improved, developed dog who has been taught his duties and knows how to discharge them. He and Jo listen to the music, probably with much the same amount of animal satisfaction; likewise as to awakened association, aspiration, or regret, melancholy or joyful reference to things beyond the senses, they are probably upon a par. But, otherwise, how far above the human listener is the brute!

Turn that dog’s descendants wild, like Jo, and in a very few years they will so degenerate that they will lose even their bark—but not their bite.

39 Ross: “Food was obviously also a matter of life or death, for starvation deaths continued to be a regular occurrence even in the kinder years after 1870.” Ross states in her notes that “[c]ases of starvation deaths ‘upon which a Coroner’s Jury have Returned a Verdict of Death from Starvation, or Death Accelerated by Privation’ were reported annually for the country and included in the Parliamentary Papers. London’s local and metropolitan newspapers also gave ample details on many cases” (234).
from Revelation is the apocalyptic promise of the New Jerusalem, even for the least of London’s creatures, a starved errand-boy with no given name. In the final lines of the novel, Don’s sacrifice is, radically, likened to Christ’s. And Hagar—the mother who has abandoned the child for whom the street waif Don perished—is content and well provided for in a Christian family of people who are united by Christ’s love—and Don’s sacrifice. Even a mother who abandons her blind father and small daughter can be redeemed, in Stretton’s fictional world.

In order further to point up the characterization of the lower-class drunken mother as unredeemable, we can briefly examine two texts of the lower-class drunken father in which the drunken father not only lives, but is redeemed. This novel published by RTS directly appeals to Scottish working-class values. As Stan Crooke states in his review of William Knox’s *Industrial Nation*, “Temperance was not a passing fad but a hallmark of working-class respectability.” Knox points out that “[t]he Edinburgh Trades Council (ETC) met in a coffee bar from its inception until 1867 and then for the next twenty years, in a temperance hotel.”

*Nelly’s Dark Days* (1870), published by the Scottish Temperance League, is a harrowing story of a man of humble thatched-cottage country origins who has come to the city, been a successful, respectable skilled worker for a time, and then has taken to drink. Once an urban hero who saved a drowning match-girl, Rodney now locks his daughter out of the house on a bitter winter night; takes her beloved, scarlet-sashed doll to pawn for gin; and steals the violets from his wife’s coffin in order to buy a dram. Finally, Nelly’s clothes catch on fire as she is trying to cook for her drunken father, and in his state of inebriation, he can only watch her burn. Thinking that Nelly has died, when Rodney recovers his senses he goes to the river to drown himself, the narrative fate of Jessica’s mother. Stretton’s description of Rodney’s tortured state of mind is dramatic:

> It was slow and weary work, creeping, creeping down to the river side. . . . He was drunk no longer. His mind was terribly clear. He knew distinctly what had happened, and what was about to happen to him if his strength would only take him down to the edge of yonder black water. (chap. 8)

But the drunken father’s narrative is not the same tragedy as the drunken mother’s. Rodney ends up unconscious, in delirium for weeks, and then in recovery, working on the docks and going to church again.

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40 See Crooke and Knox 73.
He decides that, in emulation of the Prodigal Son, he might be able to go home to both God and his rural mother. When Rodney returns to his childhood cottage, he recalls with Wordsworthian resonance the sweet purity and innocence of the time before he became a slave to gin: “Every step of the road was familiar and dear to him. Here were the nutbushes, where he and his brothers had come nutting in the autumn, when he was a boy. . . . Yonder was the bank where the violets grew thickest, and where he had been used to see the first-scented blossoms for Ellen, before they were married . . .” (chap. 13).

In this state of remembered childhood innocence, Rodney finds not only his mother but Nelly, who has not died but is an invalid, scarred forever by the fire of her father’s intemperance. Nelly lies on a couch, symbolically with a new doll to replace the one her father had stolen, and a cup of violets by her. Rodney’s wife has died at Easter, and it is a year since her death. Nelly’s cup of violets—linked to the stolen violets on Ellen’s grave and the violets he once brought to her when they were courting—also signify a kind of Resurrection. Both Nelly and Rodney have come back from the brink of death. The book concludes on a hopeful note, with Rodney alone, reading his mother’s old Bible: “My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

In Her Only Son (1887), also published by the Scottish Temperance League, the admirable countrywoman Joanna Fleming, aged sixty, has lived in the same thatched-roof stone country cottage for nearly forty years. The novel begins as she considers her decision to look after the newly motherless children of her beloved son, born in that same cottage, who has fled the country for city life in London. Born into a line of gardeners who have worked in the Squire’s Hall Gardens for generations, “nigh on three hundred years” (chap. 1), John has become a quintessential urban working man, a cabdriver who owns his own cab, bought with Joanna’s life savings. When Joanna leaves her country life and her beloved cottage, she says she is “plucking one’s self up by the roots” (chap. 1).

The act of courage by the old rural mother is treated with great respect. Joanna possesses the middle-class virtues of cleanliness and orderliness: she packs a great chest with clothes and household linen, “white-scented sheets and cloths she had washed and laid in lavender weeks ago. Her own decent dresses and muslin caps, and black satin bonnet for church-going . . .” (chap. 2).

The city is a shock to Joanna. The value the narrative places on the purity of country life is embodied in her character, and her subjectivity is

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41 This is an example of what Patricia Demers analyzes as Stretton’s romanticism in her insightful chapter “Mrs. Sherwood and Hesba Stretton.”
valued by the narrative voice, who describes her confusion sympathetically: “Surely this was a foreign, outlandish country; not England. The England she knew was made up of fields and hedges, hills and little rivulets, with farmhouses and pretty cottages dotted about, and the sun or moon shedding a natural light over them all . . .” (chap. 2). The biggest shock by far awaits Joanna: her son’s home. The first thing Joanna sees when she arrives at the ironically named 19 Gibraltar Court is the drunken men and women who have followed the cab from the spirit vaults. Her son John’s home is one filthy room up a narrow staircase, in the attics.

The “industry, and thrift, and self-denial” that John associates with his mother help to transform the “miserable and filthy hole” that is her son’s and grandchildren’s home. But the London daughter-in-law, now dead, is remembered by John’s kindly neighbor Mrs. Christie as the culprit, the bad influence for Joanna’s son: “When a woman drinks like that, what can her husband do? He’s bound to be drove to drink himself. . . . God help their children, I say!” (chap. 4). Mrs. Christie predicts that John’s daughter Ally will be worse than her mother: “She’s a little girl now, but in a two-three years she’ll want money, and she’ll get it” (chap. 4). The cultural narrative of the fallen woman in her most degraded form—the street prostitute—is thus again linked to the narrative of the drunken mother, as it was in *Jessica’s Mother*.

The novel details Joanna’s suffering because of her son’s drunkenness. The power of the narrative lies in part in the portrayal of the drunkard’s changing psychological state: “Slowly there grew in his clouded brain and besotted mind a feeling of resentment against his mother. He looked on her as a spy upon him, always treasuring up in her memory his sins against her and his children” (chap. 8). The son’s drunken behavior culminates in his turning his mother out of the house on a cold February night. The most powerful section of the novel deals with Joanna’s “sad pilgrimage” to find her old neighbor Mrs. Christie after she is pushed out the door by her son. As she becomes weaker and weaker, her thoughts about her past are portrayed: “There was a blear-eyed, hoarse-voiced, broken-down man somewhere, who called her mother, and turned her out of doors at night into the cruel cold. But that man could not be her dear child” (chap. 9). John Fleming finds his mother nearly frozen to death next to the Gibraltar Arms, this England’s gin palace, in which he has spent all her money and his own.

Unlike the drunken mothers of *Lost Gips* and *Jessica’s Mother*, John Fleming feels genuine remorse at the terrible pain he has caused: “It was all his doing; there was no one else to blame but himself” (chap. 10). With succor from the kindly vicar who runs Mission House, Joanna’s son frees
himself from his addiction to alcohol. At the close of the novel, the mother and son are together in their old country cottage again, raising her grandchildren together.

The drunken lower-class father is allowed, then, to live and to reform. However, there is an element of sorrowful responsibility that John always feels. He is not able to obtain his mother’s forgiveness, for after her illness, she cannot remember her urban experience. Joanna is thus in a sense “purified” of her dark trials in London, while John continues to suffer for his past sins: “He feels again the bitter shame and degradation into which he once plunged, and dragged his children, and his mother down with him. They have forgotten; but he cannot forget” (chap. 12). The drunken working-class father’s punishment is memory itself.

The social class of the drunken mother is the most crucial aspect that divides drunken mother narratives. In sharp contrast to the disposable mothers of Lost Gip and Jessica’s First Prayer/Jessica’s Mother, the middle-class mother, Sophy Chantrey, in Brought Home (1875)—published by the Scottish Temperance League—is not only treated with great sympathy but is allowed to keep her son Charlie. Moreover, Sophy wins her struggle against alcoholism and is alive at the close of the novel to find pleasure in her freedom from addiction. She is not only redeemed at the end of the narrative, but she is also not haunted by her past behavior, as Rodney and John Fleming are. The middle-class mother eventually rejoices in her husband and son in England.

The focus in Brought Home is on the redemption of Sophy Chantrey and the rehabilitation of the spiritually and physically diseased middle-class mother. Sophy is the beloved wife of the incumbent of Upton Rectory in a “sleepy” market town about an hour’s journey from London. The old Norman churchyard and death itself strongly pervade the novel’s opening, as David Chantrey, rector of Upton, is so ill that he must leave Sophy for sunny Madeira to mend his broken health. Soon after this sober first scene, we see Sophy grieving over her dead baby’s grave in the churchyard.

Stretton focuses for much of the story on the responsibility of the Christian community. Each person who should help Sophy reacts differently, and each is judged by the narrator for either attempting to rescue Sophy in her troubles or neglecting their duty. Among those who fail in their Christian duty, the foremost is the late archdeacon’s widow, the rich, officious Mrs. Bolton, longtime arbiter of parish affairs and David Chantrey’s aunt. Although Mrs. Bolton provides her nephew’s wife with a comfortable home during his absence, the aunt declines to keep seven-year-old Charlie in her fashionable villa, and he is sent to boarding school. Thus Sophy is deprived of her maternal responsibilities. Mrs. Bolton also refuses to help
Sophy with her growing obsession with alcohol by forbidding spirits in her home, as the current rector, Mr. Warden, advises. Mr. Warden himself is presented as remiss in his Christian duty to his parishioner and to his friend David by not committing himself to helping Sophy with her drinking problem. This presentation of those persons who fail in their Christian duty to the falling sinner presents Sophy’s problem as a concern of the entire Christian community. The result is that the reader sympathizes with Sophy and judges Mrs. Bolton and Mr. Warden instead.

Stretton provides a model Christian in the story as well, the saddler Ann Holland. She is an “elderly, old-fashioned woman [who] held firmly to all old-fashioned ways; knew her duty to God and her duty to her neighbour, as taught by the Church Catechism, and faithfully fulfilled them to the best of her power” (chap. 3). In a moving encounter between Ann and Sophy at the Chantrey baby’s grave, Ann takes the initiative that her social “betters” will not assume, and she attempts to succor the troubled young clergyman’s wife by telling her of her own alcoholic brother Richard. Eventually, Ann’s brother dies from exposure during a drunken bout, and she decides to commit herself to helping Sophy by accompanying her to New Zealand, where both Ann and David Chantrey hope that Sophy will be able more readily to resist the lure of alcohol. The most admirable character in the story is sympathetic to Sophy despite her weakness—and the reader is urged to sympathy as well.

A number of narrative strategies serve to create sympathy and hope for the middle-class mother. Sophy’s misery is documented in our access to her interiority: “There could be no harm, she thought, in taking just enough to deliver her from her very worst moments of depression . . .” (chap. 4). The reader sympathizes with the isolation and wretchedness that propels Sophy to drink, and then to drink in excess. One of the most powerful of these strategies is Stretton’s portrayal of Sophy’s struggle, shame, and love for her husband. Perhaps the most powerful of the scenes of their fight against Sophy’s degradation is a fervent sermon that David preaches on the text, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” At the close of this impassioned sermon, David sees his wife outstretched upon their baby’s grave, drunk and asleep. Although this vision causes “a moment of unutterable shame and agony for him,” he goes out to his “miserable wife” to take her home. When he is unable to lift her, he bursts into a passion of tears, after which his friends and parishioners help him to carry Sophy home, in an emblem of the need for community to save the erring sinner.

Another of the most effective of Stretton’s narrative strategies in creating sympathy for the middle-class drunken mother is the love of her child, Charlie, who suddenly becomes a character in the story at this moment.
Charlie sees his fallen mother and says only: “My mother is ill, very ill. I saw her lying on baby’s grave. Couldn’t anything be done for her to make her well?” (chap. 10). The reader is encouraged to see with Charlie’s innocent eyes that the besotted mother is more sick than sinful.

Perhaps the most memorable of Stretton’s narrative strategies occurs on shipboard during the difficult crossing to the New Zealand missionary curacy David Chantrey has accepted in order to help his desperate wife. This strategy is to dramatize a scene that presents Sophy’s heroic triumph over her desire for whiskey in the midst of a terrible storm during which her husband appears to be dying: “the strong, spirituous scent excited her.” By the time the storm—and Sophy’s symbolic psychic tempest—is over, David seems to be recovering strength, and Sophy herself has triumphed through prayer over her desperate desire for the brandy. As Sophy tells her husband, “God has made it safe for me” (chap. 17).

The middle-class drunken mother is allowed not only recuperation but eventual return to England. The recovery begun on shipboard continues in New Zealand. But unlike the emigration to Canada that closes Lost Gip, this colonial outpost is only a refuge for work and purification, not a final resting place. Eventually, David and Sophy are offered the possibility of returning home. Sophy’s recovery from alcoholism is portrayed as complete when she is again the parish clergyman’s wife at Upton Rectory, mother to her thriving son. In Brought Home, the alcohol-addicted mother is the heroine of a middle-class conversion narrative. She gets to erase her own narrative of shame by returning to the beginning of her story, and living it again, purified.

Thus the maternal ideal is salvaged in the middle-class narrative. The contrast between the narrative patterns describing the lower-class drunken mother’s disgrace and erasure through death and the middle-class alcoholic mother’s redemption seems to accomplish the cultural work of maintaining class distinctions and gender ideals while simultaneously—and in seeming contradiction—elevating the nearly Romantic, Dickensian innocent child of squalor into the middle classes under the general rubric of an equalizing Christian faith. There also seems to be an intermittent urge on Stretton’s part to find a scapegoat for the dissolution of so many families of the urban poor, although she knew firsthand that even temperance-pledged mothers might find slum conditions impossible for their beleaguered families. Although Stretton has been called a “Christian Socialist,” the trope of the drunken mother is a disturbing aspect of her generous and progressive fiction.

The child victim narrative is bolstered by the narrative of the gin-soaked mother who oppresses her own offspring. Stretton, one of the most
vocal of children’s rights advocates, upholds a child’s right to a safe environment. Poor mothers who fail in other ways and lower-class drunken fathers are punished but not eliminated from Stretton’s narratives, and they are represented as individuals capable of redemption. The concomitant sins of sexual fallenness and intemperance—no doubt actually often connected—suggest that symbolically, the willful contamination of the lower-class mother’s body is the unforgivable sin. This covert fear of moral infection as well as bodily contamination by the poor may inform Stretton’s representation. The lower-class drunken mother, a recurring figure in Stretton’s Christian texts, is not granted Christian forgiveness. She is not only nameless and dead—she is unforgiven.

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