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Содержание

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PREFACE

This work now published under the title of "The Doctor's Christmas Eve" is the one earlier announced for publication under the title of "A Brood of the Eagle."

"The Doctor, Herbert and Elsie's father, our nearest neighbor, your closest friend now in middle life – do you ever tire of the Doctor and wish him away?"

"The longer I know him, the more I like him, honor him, trust him."

– The Bride of the Mistletoe

PART I

I
THE CHILDREN OF DESIRE

The morning of the twenty-fourth of December a quarter of a century ago opened upon the vast plateau of central Kentucky as a brilliant but bitter day – with a wind like the gales of March.

Out in a neighborhood of one of the wealthiest and most thickly settled counties, toward the middle of the forenoon, two stumpy figures with movements full of health and glee appeared on a hilltop of the treeless landscape. They were the children of the neighborhood physician, a man of the highest consequence in his part of the world; and they had come from their home, a white and lemon-colored eighteenth-century manor house a mile in their rear. Through the crystalline air the chimneys of this low structure, rising out of a green girdle of cedar trees, could be seen emptying unusual smoke which the wind in its gambolling pounced upon and jerked away level with the chimney-tops.

But if you had stood on the hill where the two children climbed into view and if your eye could have swept round the horizon with adequate radius of vision, it would everywhere have been greeted by the same wondrous harmonious spectacle:

out of the chimneys of all dwellings scattered in comfort and permanence over that rich domestic land – a land of Anglo-Saxon American homes – more than daily winter smoke was pouring: one spirit of preparation, one mood of good will, warmed houses and hearts. The whole visible heaven was receiving the incense of Kentucky Christmas fires; the whole visible earth was a panorama of the common peace.

The two dauntless, frost-defying wayfarers – what Emerson, meeting them in the depths of a New England winter, might have called two scraps of valor – were following across fields and meadows and pastures one of the footpaths which children who are friendly neighbors naturally make in order to get to each other, as the young of wild creatures trace for themselves upon the earth some new map of old hereditary traits and cravings. For the goal of their journey they were hurrying toward a house not yet in sight but hardly more than a mile ahead, where they were to spend Christmas Day and share in an old people's and children's Christmas-Tree party on Christmas Night – and where also they were to put into execution a plot of their own: about which a good deal is to be narrated.

They were thus transferring the nation's yearly festival of the home from their own roof-tree to that of another family as the place where it could be enacted and enjoyed. The tragical meaning of this arrangement was but too well understood by their parents. To them the abandonment of their own fireside at the season when its bonds should have been freshened and

deepened scarcely seemed an unnatural occurrence. The other house had always been to them as a secondary home. It was the residence of their father's friend, a professor in the State University situated some miles off across fine country. His two surviving children, a boy and a girl of about their own ages, had always been their intimate associates. And the woman of that household – the wife, the mother – all their lives they had been mysteriously impelled toward this gentlewoman by a power of which they were unconscious but by which they had been swayed.

The little girl wore a crimson hood and a brown cloak and the boy a crimson skull cap and a brown overcoat; and both wore crimson mittens; and both were red-legged and red-footed; for stockings had been drawn over their boots to insure warmth and to provide safeguard against slipping when they should cross the frozen Elkhorn or venture too friskily on silvery pools in the valley bottoms.

The chestnut braids of the girl falling heavily from under her hood met in a loop in the middle of her broad fat back and were tied there with a snip of ribbon that looked like a feather out of the wing of a bluejay. Her bulging hips overreached the borders of the narrow path, so that the boy was crowded out upon the rough ground as he struggled forward close beside her. She would not allow him to walk in front of her and he disdained to walk behind.

"Then walk beside me or go back!" she had said to him, laughing carelessly.

She looked so tight inside her wrappings, so like a jolly ambulatory small barrel well hooped and mischievously daubed here and there with vermilion, that you might have had misgivings as to the fate of the barrel, were it to receive a violent jolt and be rolled over. No thought of such mishap troubled her as she trotted forward, balancing herself as lightly on her cushioned feet as though she were wind-carried thistledown. Nor was she disturbed by her selfishness in monopolizing the path and forcing her brother to encounter whatsoever the winter earth obtruded – stumps of forest trees, brambles of blackberry, sprouts of cane, or stalks of burdock and of Spanish needle. His footing was especially troublesome when he tried to straddle wide corn-rows with his short legs; or when they crossed a hemp-field where the butt-ends of the stalks serried the frost-gray soil like bayonet points. Altogether his exertions put him out of breath somewhat, for his companion was fleet and she made no allowance for his delays and difficulties.

Her hands, deep in the fleece-lined mittens, were comfortably warm; but she moreover kept them thrust into a muff of white fur, which also looked overfed and seemed of a gay harmony with its owner. This muff she now and then struck against her flexed knees in a vixenish playfulness as one beats a tambourine on a bent elbow; and at a certain point of the journey, having glanced sidewise at him and remarked his breath on the icy air, she lifted it to her mouth and spoke guardedly from behind it: —

"Remember the last thing Papa told us at the window, Herbert:

we were to keep our mouths closed and to breathe through our noses. And remember also, my child, that we were to rely upon —*especially* to rely upon – the ribs and the diaphragm! I wonder why he thought it necessary to tell us that! Did he suppose that as soon as we got by ourselves or arrived at the Ousleys', we'd begin to rely upon something else, and perhaps try to breathe with our spines and elbows?"

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and her laughter had the audacity of a child's satire, often more terrible in its small world than a sage's in his larger one. The instant she spoke, you recognized the pertness and precocity of an American child – which, when seen at its best or at its worst, is without precedent or parallel among the world's children. She was the image of a hard bold crisp newness. Her speech was new, her ideas were new, her impertinence was new – except in this country. She appeared to have gathered newness during her short life, to be newer than the day she was born. The air was full of frost spangles that zigzagged about her as she danced along; they rather seemed like particles of salt especially provided to escort her character. If it had been granted Lot's wife with tears of repentance to dissolve away the crystals of her curiosity and resume the duties of motherhood, – though possibly permeated by a mild saline solution as a warning, – that salt-cured matron might admirably have adapted herself to the decrees of Providence by producing Elsie.

The boy as she administered her caution stopped; and shutting

his own red mouth, which was like hers though more generous, he drew a long breath through his nostrils; then, throwing back his head, he blew this out with an open-mouthed puff, and a column of white steam shot up into the blue ether and was whirled away by the wind. He stood studying it awhile as it disappeared, for he was a close observer always – a perpetual watcher of the thing that is – sometimes an observer fearful to confront. Then he sprang forward to catch up with his sharp-tongued monitress, who had hurried on. As he came alongside, he turned his face toward her and made his reply, which was certainly deliberate enough in arriving: —

"We have to be *taught* the best way to breathe, Elsie; as anything else!"

The defence only brought on a fresh attack: —

"I wonder who teaches the young of other animals how to breathe! I should like to know who teaches kittens and puppies and calves and lambs how to breathe! How *do* they ever manage to get along without country doctors among them! Imagine a middle-aged sheep – old Dr. Buck – assembling a flock of lambs and trying to show them how to breathe!" Judging from Elsie's expression, the lambs in the case could not have thought very highly of this queer and genial Dr. Buck.

"But *they* are all four-legged creatures, Elsie; and *they* breathe backward and forward; if you are a two-legged animal and stand up straight, you breathe up and down: it's quite different! It's easier!"

"Then I suppose the fewer legs a thing has, the harder it is to get its breath. And I suppose if we ventured to stand on *one* leg, we'd all soon suffocate! Dear me! why *don't* all one-legged people die at once!"

The lad looked over the field of war on which it would seem that he was being mowed down by small-gun fire before he could get his father's heavy artillery into action. He decided to terminate the wordy engagement, a prudential manœuvre of the wiser head but slower tongue.

"Father is right," he declared. His manner of speaking was sturdy and decisive: it was meant to remind her first that he had enough gallantry as a male to permit her to crowd him out of the path; but that the moment a struggle for mental footing arose between them, he reserved the whole road: the female could take to the weeds! He notified her also that he stood with his father not only in this puzzling question of legs and parlous types of respiration, but that the men in the family were regularly combined against the women – like good organized against evil!

But now something further had transpired. Had there been present on the winter fields that morning an ear trained to separate our complex human tones into simple ones – to disengage one from another the different fibres of meaning which always make up even the slenderest tendril of sound (as there is a cluster of grapes to a solitary stem), it might, as it noted one thing, have discovered another. While the boy asserted his father to be right in the matter they were debating, there escaped

from him an accent of admission that his father was wrong – wrong in some far graver affair which was his discovery and his present trouble.

Therefore his voice, which should have been buoyant, for the instant was depressed; and his face, which should have been a healthy boy's happy face, was overcast as by a foreign interference. You might have likened it to a small luminary upon the shining disk of which a larger body, traversing its darkened orbit, has just begun to project a wavering shadow. And thus some patient astronomer of our inter-orbited lives, sweeping the spiritual heavens for signs of its pendent mysteries, here might have arrested his telescope to watch the portent of a celestial event: was there to take place the eclipse of a son by a father?

Certainly at least this weight of responsibility on the voice must have caused it to strike only the more winningly upon any hearer. It was such a devoted, loyal voice when he thus spoke of his father, with a curious quavering huskiness of its own, as though the bass note of his distant manhood were already beginning to clamor to be heard.

The voice of the little girl contrariwise was a shrill treble. Had you first become aware of it at your back, you must instantly have wheeled to investigate the small creature it came from, as a wild animal quickly turns to face any sound that startles its instincts. Voltaire might have had such a voice if he had been a little girl. Yet to look at her, you would never have imagined that anything but the honey of speech could have dripped from so perfect a

little rose. (Many surprises await mankind behind round amiable female faces: shrews are not *all* thin.)

Instead of being silenced by her brother's ultimatum, she did not deign to notice it, but continued to direct her voluble satire at her father – quite with the air of saying that a girl who can satirize a parent is not to be silenced by a son.

"… forever telling us that American children must have the newest and best way of doing everything… My, my, my! The working of our jaws! And the drinking and the breathing; and the stretching and the bending: developing everything we have – and everything we haven't! I am even trying now to find an original American way to go to sleep at night and to wake up in the morning! Dear me, but old people can be silly without knowing it!" She laughed with much self-approval.

For Elsie had already entered into one of mankind's most dependable recreations – the joy of listening to our own words: into that economic arrangement of nature whereby whatsoever a human being might lose through the vocal cords is returned to the owner along the auditory nerve! So that a woman can eat her colloquial cake times over: and each time, having devoured it, can return it to the storeroom and have it brought out as whole and fresh as ever – sometimes actually increased in size. And a man can send his vocal Niagara through his whirlpool rapids and catch it again above the falls! The more gold the delver unearths, the more he can empty back into the thinking mine. One can sit in his own cranial theatre and produce his own play: he can be

stage and orchestra, audience and critic; and he can see that the claque does not get drowsy and slack: it never does – in *this* case!

The child now threw back her round winter-rose of a face and started along the path with a fresh outburst of speed and pride. Access of impertinence seemed to have released in her access of vitality. Perhaps it had. Perhaps it always does. Perhaps life itself at the full is sheer audacity.

The lad scrambled roughly along, and merely repeated the words that sufficed for him: —

"Father knows."

Suddenly he gave a laughing outcry, and stood still.

"Look!" he called out, with amusement at his plight.

He had run into some burdock, and the nettles had stuck to his yarn stockings like stinging bees – a cluster of them about his knees and calves. He drew off his gloves, showing the strong, overgrown hands of boyhood: they, like his voice, seemed impatiently reaching out for maturity.

When he overtook his companion, who had not stopped, he had transferred a few of the burrs to his skull cap. He had done this with crude artistry – from some faint surviving impulse of primitive man to decorate his body with things around him in nature: especially his head (possibly he foresaw that his head would be most struck at). The lad was pleased with his caper; and, smiling, thrust his head across her path, expecting her to take sympathetic notice. He had reason to expect this, because on dull rainy days at home he often amused her with the things

he did and the things he made: for he was a natural carpenter and toy-maker. But now she took only the contemptuous notice of disapproval. This morning her mind was intent on playthings of positive value: she was a little travelling ten-toed pagoda of holiday greed. Every Christmas she prepared for its celebration with a balancing eye to what it would cost her and what it would bring in: she always calculated to receive more than she gave: for Elsie, the Nativity must be made *to pay*!

He resented her refusal to approve his playfulness by so much as a smile, and he came back at her by doing worse: —

"Why didn't I think to bring all the burrs along and make a Christmas basket for Elizabeth? Now what will I give her?"

This drew out a caustic comment quickly enough: —

"Poor Elizabeth!"

A child resents injustice with a blow or rage or tears: the old have learned to endure without a sign – waiting for God's day of judgment (or their first good opportunity!).

He was furious at the way she said "Poor Elizabeth" – as though Elizabeth's hands would be empty of gifts from him.

"You *know* I have *bought* my presents for Elizabeth, Elsie!" he exclaimed. "But Elizabeth thinks more of what I *make* than of what I *buy*," he continued hotly. "And the less it is worth, the more she values it. But you can't understand *that*, Elsie! And you needn't try!"

The little minx laughed with triumph that she had incensed him.

"I don't expect to try!" she retorted blithely. "I don't see that I'd gain anything, if I *did* understand. You and Elizabeth are a great deal too – "

He interrupted overbearingly: —

"Leave Elizabeth out! Confine your remarks to me!"

"My remarks will be wholly unconfined," said Elsie, as she trotted forward.

He scrambled alongside in silent rage. Perhaps he was thinking of his inability to reach protected female license. He may obscurely have felt that life's department of justice was being balked at the moment by its department of natural history – a not uncommon interference in this too crowded world. At least he put himself on record about it: —

"If you were a boy, Elsie, you'd get taken down a buttonhole!"

"Don't you worry about my buttonholes!" chirped Elsie. "My buttonholes are where they ought to be!"

It was not the first time that he had made something of this sort for Elizabeth. One morning of the May preceding he had pulled apart the boughs of a blooming lilac bush in the yard, and had seen a nest with four pale-green eggs. That autumn during a ramble in the woods and fields he had taken burrs and made a nest and deposited in it four pale-green half-ripe horse chestnuts.

Elizabeth, who did not amount to much in this world but breath and a soft cloud of hair and sentiment, had loyally carried it off to her cabinet of nests. These were duly arranged on shelves, and labelled according to species and life and love: "The Meadow

Lark's" – "The Blue-bird's" – "The Orchard Oriole's" – "The Brown Thrasher's"; on and on along the shelves. At the end of a row she placed this treasured curiosity, and inscribed it, "An Imitation by a Young Animal."

Elizabeth's humor was a mild beam.

Do country children in that part of the world make such playthings now? Do they still look to wild life and not wholly to the shops of cities for the satisfying of their instincts for toys and games and fancies?

Do alder stalks still race down dusty country lanes as thoroughbred colts, afterwards to be tied in their stalls in fence corners with halters of green hemp? Does any little rustic instrument-maker now draw melodies from a homegrown corn-stalk? Across rattling window-panes of old farm-houses – between withered sashes – during long winter nights does there sound the æolian harp made with a hair from a horse-tail? Do boys still squeeze the red juice of poke-berries on the plumage of white barnyard roosters, thus whenever they wish bringing on a cock-fight between old far-squandered Cochins, who long previously had entered into a treaty as to their spheres of influence in a Manchuria of hens? Do the older boys some wet night lead the youngest around the corner of the house in the darkness and show him, there! rising out of the ground! the long expected Devil come at last (as a pumpkin carved and candle-lighted) for his own particular urchin? When in autumn the great annual ceremony of the slaughter of the swine takes place on

the farms at the approach of the winter solstice, – a festival running back to aboriginal German tribes before the beginnings of agriculture, when the stock that had been fattened on the mast and pasturage of the mountains was driven down into the villages and perforce killed to keep it from starving, – when this carnival of flesh recurs on Kentucky farms, do boys with turkey-quills or goose-quills blow the bladders up, tie the necks and hang them in smoke-houses or garrets to dry; and then at daybreak of Christmas morning, having warmed and expanded them before the fire, do they jump on them and explode them – a primitive folk-rite for making a magnificent noise ages older than the use of crackers and cannon?

Do children contrive their picture-frames by glueing October acorns and pine-cones to ovals of boards and giving the mass a thick coat of varnish? On winter nights do little girls count the seeds of the apples they are eating and pronounce over them the incantation of their destinies – thus in another guise going through the same charm of words that Marguerite used as she scattered earthward the petals of trust and ruin? Do they, sitting face to face bareheaded on sun-hued meadows, pluck the dandelion when its seed are clustered at the top like a ball of gauze, and with one breath try to blow these off: for the number of seed that remain will tell the too many years before they shall be asked in marriage? Do they slit the stems and cast them into the near brook and watch them form into ringlets and floating hair – as of a water spirit? Do they hold buttercups under each

other's chins to see who likes butter – that is, mind you, *good* butter! Romping little Juliets of Nature's proud courtyards – with young Montagues watching from afar! Sane little Ophelias of the garland at the water's brink – secure for many years yet from all sad Hamlets! Do country children do such things and have such notions now?

Perhaps once in a lifetime, on some summer day when the sky was filled with effulgence and white clouds, you may have seen a large low-flying bird cross the landscape straight away from you, so exactly poised under the edge of a cloud, that one of the wings beat in shadow while the other waved in light. Thus these two children, following their path over the fields that morning, ran along the dividing-line between the darkness and the light of their world.

On one side of them lay the thinning shadow of man's ancient romance with Nature which is everywhere most rapidly dying out in this civilization – the shadow of that romance which for ages was the earliest ray of his religion: in later centuries became the splendor of his art; then loomed as the historic background of his titanic myths and fables; and now only in obscure valleys is found lingering in the play of superstitious children at twilights before darkness engulfs them – the latest of the infants in the dusk of the oldest gods.

On the other side blazed the hard clear light of that realism of human life which is the unfolding brightness of the New World; that light of reason and of reasonableness which seems to take

from man both his mornings and his evenings, with all their half-lights and their mysteries; and to leave him only a perpetual noonday of the actual in which everything loses its shadow. So the two ran that morning. But so children ever run – between the fresh light and the old darkness of ever-advancing humanity – between the world's new birth and a forgetting.

On the brother and sister skipped and bounded, wild with health and Christmas joy. Their quarrel was in a moment forgotten – happy children! The nature of the little girl was not deep enough to remember a quarrel; the boy's nature was too deep to remember one. Crimson-tipped, madcap, winter spirits! The blue dome vaulting infinitely above them with all its clouds pushed aside; the wind throwing itself upon them at every step like some huge young animal force unchained for exercise and rude in its good-natured play. As they crossed a woodland pasture the hoary trees rocked and roared, strewing in their path bits of bark and rotten twigs and shattered sprigs of mistletoe. In an open meadow a yellow-breasted lark sprang reluctantly from its cuddling-place and drifted far behind them on the rushing air. In a corn-field out of a dried bunch of partridge grass a rabbit started softly and went bobbing away over the corn-rows – with its white flag run up at the rear end of the fortifications as a notice "Please not to shoot or otherwise trespass!" Alas, that so palpable and polite a request should be treated as so plain a target!

Once the little girl changed her trotting gait to a walk nearly as fast, so that her skirts swished from side to side of her plump hips

with wren-like energy and briskness. Her mind was still harping on her father; and having satirized him, and adoring him, she now would fain approve him.

"My! but it's cold, Herbert! Papa says it is not sickness that plays havoc with you: it's not being ready for sickness; and being ready depends upon how you have lived: it depends upon what you are; and that's where your virtue comes in, my child, if you have any virtue. We have been taught to stay out of doors when it is cold; and now we can come out when it is colder. We were ready for the crisis!" and Elsie pushed her nose into the air with smallish amusement.

The boy gravely pondered her words about crisis, and pondered his own before replying: —

"I wonder what kind of children we'd have been if we'd had some other father. Or some other *mother*," he added with a change of tone as he uttered that last word; and he looked askance at his sister to see whether she would glance at him.

She kept her face set straight forward; but she impatiently exclaimed: —

"Others, others, others! You are always thinking of *others*, Herbert!"

"I am one of them myself! I am one of the others myself!" cried the boy, relieved that his secret was his own; and bounding suddenly on the earth also as if with a sense of his kinship to its unseen host.

The question he had asked marked him: for he was one of the

children who from the outset begin to ask of life what it means and who are surprised when there is no one to tell them. For him there was no rest until he solved some mystery or had at least found out where some mystery stood abandoned on the road – a mystery still. Her intelligence stopped short at what she perfectly knew. She saw with amazing clearness, but she beheld very little. Hers was that order of intelligence which is gifted with vision of almost terrifying accuracy – at short range: life is a thin painted curtain, and its depths are the painted curtain's depths.

Once they came to a pair of bars which led into a meadow. The bars were of green timber and were very heavy. As he strained and tugged at them, she waited close behind him, dancing to the right and to the left so that there was a sound of mud-crystals being crushed under her tyrannical little fat feet.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" she exclaimed with impatience. "We may run in the cold, but we must not stand still in the cold;" and she kicked him on the heels and pummelled him between the shoulders with her muff.

"I am doing my best," he said, laughing heartily.

"Your best is not good enough," she urged, laughing heartily likewise.

"This bar is wedged tight. It's the sap that's frozen to the post. Look out there behind!"

He stepped back, and, with a short run, lifted his leg and kicked the bar with his full strength. The recoil threw him backward to the ground, but he was quickly on his feet again;

and as the bar was now loosened, he let it down for her. She stepped serenely through and without looking back or waiting trotted on. He put the bars up and with a spurt soon overtook her, for the meadow they were now crossing had been closely grazed in the autumn and there was better walking. They went up rising ground and reached one of those dome-like elevations which are a feature of the blue-grass country.

Straight ahead of them half a mile away stood the house toward which they were hastening; a two-story brick house, lifted a little above its surroundings of yard and gardens and shrubbery and vines: an oak-tree over its roof, cedar-trees near its windows, ivy covering one of its walls, a lawn sloping from it to a thicket of evergreens where its Christmas Tree each year was cut.

The children greeted with fresh enthusiasm the sight of this charming, this ideal place to which they were transferring their Christmas plans and pleasures – abandoning their own hearthstone. There lived their father's friend; there lived Harold and Elizabeth, their friends; and there lived the wife and mother of the household – the woman toward whom from their infancy they had been herded as by a driving hand.

The tell-tale Christmas smoke of the land was pouring from its chimneys, showing that it was being warmed through and through for coming guests and coming festivities. At one end of the building, in an ell, was the kitchen; it sent forth a volume of smoke, the hospitable invitations of which there was no misunderstanding. At the opposite end was the parlor: it stood for

the Spirit, as the kitchen for the honest Flesh: the wee travellers on the distant hilltop thought of the flesh first.

They had no idea of the origin of the American Christmas. They did not know that this vast rolling festival has migrated to the New World, drawing with it things gathered from many lands and centuries; that the cooking and the feasting crossed from pagan England; that the evergreen with its lights and gifts came from pagan Germany; that the mystical fireside with its stockings was introduced from Holland; that the evergreen now awaiting them in the shut and darkened parlor of this Kentucky farm-house represented the sacred Tree which has been found in nearly every ancient land and is older than the Tree of Life in the literature of Eden.

As far as they thought of the antiquity of the Christmas festival at all, it had descended straight from the Holy Land and the Manger of Bethlehem; this error now led to complications.

The boy's crimson skull-cap had a peak which curled forward; and attached to this peak by several inches of crewel hung a round crimson ball about the size of the seed-ball of a sycamore. The shifting wind blew it hither and thither so that it buffeted him in the face and eyes. On this exposed height, especially, the wind raced free; and he ducked his head and turned his face sidewise toward her – an imp of winter joy – as he shouted across the gale: —

"If people are still baking such quantities of cake in memory of Christmas after all these hundreds of years, don't you suppose,

Elsie, that the Apostles must have been fearful cake-eaters? To have left such an impression on the world! Cake *is* a kind of sacred thing at home even yet, isn't it? A fine cake looks still as if it was baked for an Apostle! Doesn't it? Now doesn't it?"

Elsie did not reply at once. Her younger brother was growing into the habit of saying unexpected things. Once after he had left the breakfast table, she had heard her father say to her mother that he had genius. Elsie was not positive as to all that genius comprised; but she at once decided that if she did not possess genius she did not wish genius. However she packed herself off to her room and thought further about this unpleasant parental discrimination.

"If he has genius," she said finally, "at least he did not get it from *them*," and there was a triumph in her eye. "I see not the slightest sign of genius in either of *them:* he must have gotten it from our grandparents – never from *them*!"

From that moment she had begun to oppose her mind to his mind as a superior working instrument in a practical world. Whenever he put forth a fancy, she put forth a fact; and the fact was meant to extinguish the fancy as a muffler puts out a candle. After a moment she now replied – with a mind that had repudiated genius: —

"Nothing is said in the New Testament, my child, about cake. The only thing mentioned is loaves and fishes. But they *do* seem to have done an unconscionable amount of dining on bread and fish!" and Elsie had her own satirical laugh at the table customs

of ancient Palestine as viewed from the Kentucky standard of the nineteenth century.

The boy before replying deliberated as always.

"They may not have had cake, but they had meat: because they said he sat with sinners at meat. I wonder why it was always *the sinners* who got *the meat*!"

Elsie could offer no personal objection to this: Providence had ordained her to dwell in the tents of flesh herself.

"How could they feed five thousand people on five loaves and two fishes? How *could* they? At one of those fish dinners!"

"They did it!" said Elsie flatly. She saw the whole transaction with brilliant clearness – saw to the depths of the painted curtain. It was as naturally fact as the family four of them at breakfast that morning, fed on home-smoked sausages and perfectly digestible buckwheat cakes.

"And twelve baskets of crumbs! That makes it worse! With bread for thousands everywhere, why pick up crumbs?"

"Nothing is said about crumbs; they were fragments."

"But if I've got to believe it, I've got to think how they did it! I've *got* to! If I can't think of it as it is, I must think of it as it isn't! But I can't do anything with the loaves; I give up the bread. However, I think those two fish might have been leviathans. That would be only two thousand five hundred people to each leviathan. Many of them might not have liked leviathan. I wouldn't have wanted any! They could have skipped me! They could have had my slice! And the babies – they didn't want *much*!

Anyhow, that's the best I can do for the fish"; and he had his laugh also – not an incessant ripple like hers, but a music issuing from the depths of him through joy in the things he saw.

Elsie made the reply which of late was becoming habitual in her talks with him.

"Don't begin to be *peculiar*, Herbert. You are too young to be *peculiar*. Leave that to old people!" and Elsie's mind glided off from the loaves and the fishes of Galilee to certain old people of her neighborhood from whose eccentricities she extracted acrid amusement.

The boy's words were not irreverent; irreverence had never been taught him; he did not know what irreverence was. They merely expressed the primary action of his mind in dealing with what to him was a wonder-story of Nature. And yet with this same mind which asked of wonder that it be reasonable, he was on his way to the celebration of Christmas Eve and to the story of the Nativity – the most joyous, the most sad, the most sublime Nature-story of mankind.

His unconscious requirement was that this also must be reasonable; if it were not, he would accept the portions that were reasonable and reject the others as now too childish for his fore-handed American brain.

They were nearing the end of their bitter walk. The little girl as she hurried forward now and then strained her eyes toward the opposite ends of the house ahead; at the kitchen smoke which promised such gifts to the flesh; at the window-shutters of the

darkened parlor where the Christmas Tree stood, soon to be decorated with presents: some for her – the little fat mercenary now approaching who was positive that during these days of preparation she had struck a shrewd bargain with the Immortal.

The boy, too, looked at these windows; but especially he looked at another between them, from which perhaps Elizabeth was watching for him.

Once he turned, and, walking backward, directed his gaze from this high point far across the country. Somewhere back there his father might now be stopping at a farm-house. A malignant disease was raging among the children of the neighborhood, some of whom were his schoolmates and friends; the holidays would bring no merry Christmas for them.

Wherever his father might be, there an influence started and came rushing across the landscape like the shadow of a cloud. It fell upon him, and travelled on toward the house he was approaching; it disappeared within the house and fell upon the woman who so wonderfully moved about in it: a chilling mysterious shadow that bound the three of them – his father and himself and this gentle woman – together in a band of darkness.

Then he faced about and ran on, longing the more ardently for Elizabeth: the path between him and Elizabeth lay before his nimble feet like a band of light.

II
WHEN A BOY FINDS OUT ABOUT HIS FATHER

On the day preceding that twenty-fourth of December when his two weather-proof untrammelled children were rioting over the frozen earth, Dr. Birney met with an event which may here be set down as casting the first direct light upon him. Some reflected radiance may already have gone glancing in his direction from the luminous prattle of his offspring; some obscure glimpses must therein have bodied him forth: and the portraits that children unconsciously paint of people – what trained hand ever drew such living lines?

A short stretch across the country from his comfortable manor house there towered in stateliness one of the finest homesteads of this region; and in the great bedroom of this house, in the mother's bed, there had lain for days one of his patients critically ill, the only child of an intense mother who was herself no longer young.

Early that morning upon setting out he had driven rapidly to this house, gotten quickly out, and been quickly received through the front door thrown open to admit him. After examining the child, he had turned to the mother and spoken the words that are probably the happiest ever to fall from any tongue upon any ear:

—

"He is out of danger. He is getting well."

At this intelligence the mother forgot the presence of another mother older than herself who had come to be with her during these vigils and anxieties. As the doctor, having spoken a few words to the nurse, passed out into the hall toward the hat-rack, she led him into the parlors; she pulled him down into a chair beside the one she took; she caught his hand in hers and drew it into her lap. She forgot that after all she was a woman and he was a man; she remembered only that she was a mother and he a physician; and unnerved by the relief from days and nights of tension, she poured out her quivering gratitude.

The doctor with a warm light in his eyes listened; and he was flushed with pleasure also at his skill in bringing his case through; but she had scarcely begun before his expression showed embarrassment. Gratitude rendered him ill at ease: who can thank Science? Who can thank a man for doing his duty and his best? With a smile of deprecation he interrupted: —

"A great surgeon of France centuries ago was accustomed to say of a convalescent patient: 'God cured him; I dressed him.' I do not know whether, if I dared speak for the science of medicine near the close of the nineteenth century, I could say that. That is not the language of science now. If science thanks anything, it thanks other sciences and respects itself. But I will say that I might not have been able to save the life of your son if he had not been a healthy child – and a happy one; for happiness in a child

is of course one of its signs of health. In his case I did not have to treat a patient with a disease; I had merely to treat a disease in a patient: and there is a great difference. The patient kept out of the case altogether, or in so far as he entered it, he entered it as my assistant. But if he had not been healthy and happy, the result might have been – well, different."

The mother's face became more radiant.

"If his health and happiness helped him through," she exclaimed, "then his mother enters into the case; for his health was his birthright from his parents; and his happiness – on account of the absence of his father during most of his life when he has been awake – has been a gift from his mother. He has lived with Happiness; Happiness has been before his eyes; Happiness has filled his ears; Happiness has held him in its arms; Happiness has danced for his feet; Happiness has rocked him to sleep; Happiness has smiled over him when he awoke. He has not known anything but Happiness because Happiness has been his mother. And so, if he owes the preservation of his life to Happiness, he owes it to the instinct of maternal imitation."

The doctor had heard this carolling of maternity with full approval – this heaven-rising skylark song of motherhood; but at the last sentence he pricked up his ears with disfavor and stopped smiling: with him these were marks that he had withdrawn his intellectual fellowship. The trouble was that he esteemed her a charming and irreproachable woman and wife and mother; but that he could accord her no rank as a scientist, no standing

whatsoever; and therefore he must part company with her when she spoke for instincts. The instinct of maternal imitation – the vanity of it! That her sex could believe a child to be sent into this world by the great Mother of all wisdom and given so poor a start as to be placed under the tyranny of an instinct to imitate any other imperfect human being – man or woman.

Perhaps it was one of his weaknesses, when he came upon a case of folly, to wish to perform an operation in mental surgery at once – and without anæsthetics, in order that the wide-awake intelligence of the sufferer might be enlisted against the recurrence of such a necessity.

In a tone of affectionate forbearance he now said: —

"If only there were any such thing in Nature as the instinct of maternal imitation! Children have enough instincts to battle with and fight their way through, as it is. Let me beg of you not to teach your child anything as criminally wrong as that; and don't you be so criminally wrong as to believe it!"

The mother's countenance fell. She released the doctor's hand and pushed her chair back; and she brushed out her lap with both hands as though his words might somehow have fallen into it, and she did not wish them to remain there. She spoke caustically: —

"No intimate sacred bond between mother and child which guides it to imitate her?"

She felt as though he had attacked the very citadel of motherhood; as though he had overthrown the tested and adopted standards of universal thinking, the very basic idea of existence;

and she recoiled from this as a taint of eccentricity in him – that early death-knell of a physician's usefulness.

But the doctor swept her words away with gay warmth: —

"Oh, there is the intimate sacred bond, of course! No doubt the most intimate, the most sacred in this world. Believe in that all you can: the more the better! But we are not speaking of that: that has nothing to do with this imagined instinct of maternal imitation. Don't you know that a foundling in a foundling asylum as instinctively imitates its nurse? Don't you know that a child as instinctively imitates its stepmother – if it loves her? Don't you know that a child as instinctively imitates its grandmother?"

The mother lay back in her chair and looked at him without a word. But then, Doctor Birney could be rude, curt, brutal. In proof of which he now leaned over toward her and continued with more gentleness: —

"Do you not know that every child in this world begins its advance into life by one path only – the path of least resistance? and its path of least resistance is paved and lined with what it likes! As soon as it can do anything for itself, it tries to do what it likes, and it never tries to do anything else. When, later on, a time comes when it can be persuaded to do a thing that it has already desired *not* to do, then its will comes into the case; it ceases to be simply a little animal and becomes a little human animal; it begins to be moral and heroic instead of unmoral and unheroic. But we are not talking about that. The best we can do is to call those earliest movements of its life the reaching out

of its instincts and its taking hold of things that are like its own leading traits. The parallel is in Nature where the tendril of a vine takes hold of the matured branch of the same vine and pulls itself up by this. Thus one generation knits itself to another through the binding of like to like; and that is the whole bond between mother and child or father and child: it is like attaching itself to like under the influence of love. In this world every subject has two doors: you open one, and the good things come out. You open the other, and the evil things come out. This subject has its two doors: and I open first the door of Mother of Pearl – for you two pearls of mothers! Out of it come all the exquisite radiant traits that bind mothers and children. How many great men in history have begun their growth by attaching themselves to the great traits of their mothers? Then there is the other door. I am sorry to open it, but whether I open it or not, opened it will be: the Door of Ebony behind which are imprisoned all the dark things that bind parents and children. I am afraid I shall have to illustrate: if a child is born mendacious and its mother has mendacity as one of her leading traits, its little mendacity will flourish on her large mendacity. If it is born deceitful, and hypocrisy is one of her traits, hypocrisy in it will pull itself up by taking hold of hypocrisy in her. If it is born quick-tempered, and if ungovernable temper is one of her failings, every exhibition of this in her will foster its impatience and lack of self-control. These are some few of the dreadful things that come out: and if it is dreadful even to speak of them, think how much more dreadful

to see them alive and to set them at work! Now let's shut the dark Door! And let us hope that some day Nature herself may not be able to open it ever again!"

Hitherto the older of the two mothers, the mother of many children, had remained silent with that peculiar expression of patience and sweetness which lies like a halo on the faces of good women who have brought many children into the world. She now spoke as if to release many thoughts weighing heavily upon her.

"It has always been my trouble – not that my children would not imitate me, but that they *would* imitate me! I have my faults, for I am human; and I can endure them as long as they remain mine. They have ceased to give me much concern. I suppose in a way I have grown attached to them, just as I like people whom I do not entirely approve. But as soon as I see the children reproducing my faults, these become responsibilities. They keep me awake at night; sometimes they distress me almost beyond endurance. I know I have spent many anxious years with this problem. And I know also that the only times when their father has been overanxious about his failings has been when the boys have imitated *him*. He is always ready to lead a splendid attack on his faults, and they march at him from the direction of the boys!"

"And so," said the doctor, laughing, "this instinct of parental imitation is an instrument safe to take by the handle, and dangerous to grasp by the blade!"

He knew fathers in the neighborhood who were dreading the time when their sons might begin to imitate them – too far. And

other fathers dreading the hour when their sons might cease to imitate their sires, and wander away preferably to imitate persons outside the family connection, – possibly an instinct of non-parental imitation!

He rose to go in a mood of great good nature, and looked from one to the other of the two mothers: —

"Perhaps Nature protected children from the danger of imitating by not making it their duty to imitate. And perhaps, as all parents are imperfect human beings, she may have thought it simple justice to children to confer upon them the right to be disobedient. At least, if there is an instinct to obey, it is backed up with an equal instinct not to obey; and the two seem to have been left to fight it out between themselves; and that perhaps is the great battle-field where incessant fighting goes on between parents and children. And at least disobedience has been of equal value with obedience in the making of human history, in the development of the race. For if children had simply obeyed their parents, if the young had been born merely to ape the old, there never would have been any human young and old. We should all still be apes, even if we had developed as far as that. You two ladies – of course with greatly modified features – might be throwing cocoanuts at each other on the tops of two rival palm-trees. Or – as the dutiful daughters of dutiful mothers – you might be taking afternoon naps in an oasis of dates – all because of that instinct of maternal imitation!"

He hurried out to the hat-rack, making his retreat at the top

of his own high spirits, they following; and with one glove on he held out his hand to the mother of the sick boy: —

"I'll come in the morning to see how he is – and to see how his mother is. Now shake hands and say I have been a good doctor to you both."

The mother's reply showed that bitterness rankled in her, as she yielded her hand coldly: —

"Even if you have tried to destroy for me the intimate sacred bond between a mother and her child, I don't think you will be able to deny that my boy is a healthy and happy child because he is a child of a perfect marriage!" And she looked with secret and shaded import at the other mother.

As the doctor drove out of the yard her last words lingered —*the healthy children of a perfect marriage*. And the look the two mothers had exchanged! It was as though each had a sword in her eye and touched him with the point of it – hinting that he merited being run through. How often during these years he had encountered that same look from other mothers of the neighborhood!

"But if a wound like that could have been fatal," he reflected, "if a wound like that could have finished me, I should not have been here to save the life of her boy; he would have been dead this morning."

Then his mind under the rigor of long training passed to happier subjects. His success in the case of this child was one more triumph in his long list; it renewed his grip on power within

him.

But for the necessity to provide for a people the services of general practitioner, Dr. Birney would have made a specialty of children's diseases. The happiest moment he experienced in his profession was a day such as this when he could announce the triumph of his skill and the saving of a young life. There was no sadder one than any day on which he walked out of the sick chamber and at the threshold met the gaunt ancient Presence, waiting to stalk in and take the final charge of the case given up by the vanquished physician. And when a few days later he sat in his buggy on the turnpike at the end of a procession – his healthy little patient stretched prostrate at the other end – he driving there as the public representative of a science that was ages old and that had gathered from all lands the wisdom of the best minds but was still impotent – on such a day he went down to his lowest defeat.

He had such faith in the future of his science that he looked forward to the time when there would be no such monstrous tragedy on this planet as infant mortality. No healthy child would ever be allowed to die of disease; disease would never be permitted to reach it, or reaching it, would be arrested as it arrived. The vast multitude of physicians and surgeons now camped around the morning of life, waiting to receive the incoming generations on the rosy mountain-tops of its dawn – nearly all these would be withdrawn; they would move across the landscape of the world and pitch their tents on the plains of waning daylight; there to receive the ragged and broken army that

came staggering from the battle-field, every soldier more or less wounded, every soldier more or less weary; there to give them a twilight of least suffering, their sundown of peace; and there to arrange that the great dark Gates closed on them softly.

The conversation that morning disclosed among other facts the secret dread of Dr. Birney's life: that the time would come when his children, especially his boy, might begin to imitate him more than he desired. For a long time now he had kept under closest observation the working out in each of them of the law of like attaching itself to like; for already this had borne fruit for both on the vine of his own profession.

A physician in a city may practise his profession with complete segregation from the members of his family; his office may be miles away; if he sees his patients in his house, his children are kept in another part of it. But out in the country the whole house is open; the children rove everywhere; if their father is a physician, they know when he starts and when he returns; and there is displayed in full view the entire drama of his life. And this life is twofold: for the physician must demonstrate as no member of any other profession is required to do – that whoever would best serve mankind must first best serve himself. In this service he must reach a solution of the selfish and the unselfish; he must reconcile the world's two warring philosophies of egoism and altruism. The outside world has its attention fixed solely upon the drama of the physician's public service to it; for the members of his own family is reserved acquaintance with the drama of his

devotion to himself. Well for him and well for them if they do not misunderstand!

Each of Dr. Birney's children responded to the attraction of a phase of his life – the phase that appealed to a leading trait in each.

From the time of the little girl's beginning to observe her father she was influenced by what looked to her like his self-love: his care about what he ate and drank; his changing of his clothes whenever he came home, whether they were drenched or were dry; his constant washing of his hands; all this pageant of self-adulation mirrored itself in her consciousness. When he was away from home, she could still follow him by her mother's solicitude for his comfort and safety. To Elsie's mother the ill were not so much a source of anxiety as a husband who was perfectly well; and thus there had been built up in Elsie herself the domineering idea that her father was the all-important personage in the neighborhood as a consequence of thinking chiefly of himself. Selfishness in her reached out and twined itself like a tendril about selfishness in him; and she proceeded to lift herself up and grow by this vital bond.

Too young to transmit this resemblance, she did what she could to pass it on to the next generation: she handed it down and disseminated it in her doll-house. There was something terrifying and grim and awful in the fatalistic accuracy with which Elsie reproduced her father's selfishness among her dolls, because it was on a mimic scale what is going on all over the

world: the weaving by children's fingers of parental designs long perpetuated in the tapestry of Nature; the same old looms, the same old threads, the same old designs – but new fingers.

One of the dolls was known as "the doctor"; the others were the members of his family and his domestics. This puppet was a perfect child-image of the god of self-idolatry, as set up in the person of a certain Dr. Downs Birney, and as observed by his very loyal and most affectionate and highly amused daughter Elsie.

One day the doctor, quietly passing the opened door of the nursery, saw Elsie on the floor with her back turned to him faithfully copying and dramatizing some of the daily scenes of his professional life. His eyes shone with humor as he looked on; but there was sadness in them as he turned silently away.

With the boy it was otherwise. The earliest notion of his father the boy had grasped was that of always travelling toward the sick – to a world that needed him. All the roads of the neighborhood – turnpikes, lanes, carriage-tracks, wagon-tracks, foot-paths – met at his father's house; if you followed any one of them long enough, sooner or later you would reach some one who was sick.

When he was quite young his father began to take him in his buggy on his circuits; and at every house where they stopped, he witnessed this never-ending drama of need and aid. Such countenances people had as they followed his father out to the buggy where he was holding the reins! Such happy faces – or so sad, so sad! Souls hanging on his father's word as though life

went on with it or went to pieces with it. Actually his father had no business of his own: he merely drove about and enabled other people to attend to their business! He one day asked him why he did not *sometimes* do something for himself and the family!

Thus a leading trait in him gripped that branch of his father's life where hung his service to others; and by this vital bond it lifted itself up and began to flourish in its long travel toward maturity. He literally took hold of his father, as a social implement, by the well-worn handle of common use.

His presence in the buggy with his father was not incidental; it was the doctor's design. He wished to have the boy along during these formative years in order that he might get the right start toward the great things of life as these one by one begin to break in upon the attention of a growing boy. The doctor wanted to be the first to talk with him – the first to sow the right suggestions: it was one of his sayings that the earliest suggestions rooted in the mind of the child will be the final things to drop from the dying man's brain: what goes in first comes out last.

And so there began to be many conversations; incredible questions; answers not always forthcoming. And a series of revelations ensued; the boy revealing his growth to a watchful father, and a father revealing his life to a very watchful son! These revelations began to look like mile-stones on life's road, marked with further understandings.

Thus, one day when the boy was a good deal younger than now, his father had come home and had gotten ready to go

away again and was sitting before the fire, looking gravely into it and taking solitary counsel about some desperate case, as the country doctor must often do. Being a very little fellow then, he had straddled one of his father's mighty legs and had balanced himself by resting his hands on his father's mighty shoulders.

"Is somebody very sick?"

The head under the weather-roughened hat nodded silently.

"I wonder how it happens that all the sick are in our neighborhood."

A smile flitted across the doctor's mouth.

"The sick are in all neighborhoods, little wonderer."

He said this cheerfully. It was his idea – and he tried to enforce it at home – that young children must never, if possible, make the acquaintance of the words *bad* and *sad*– nor of the realities that are masked behind them. He especially believed that what the old are familiar with as life's tragic laws ought never to be told to children as tragic: what is inevitable should never be presented to them as misfortunes.

Therefore he now declared that the sick are in all neighborhoods as he might have stated that there are wings on all birds, or leaves on all growing apple trees.

"Not all over the world?" asked the boy, enlarging his vision in space.

"All over the world," admitted the doctor with entire cheerfulness; the fact was a matter of no consequence.

"Not all the time?" asked the boy, enlarging his outlook in

time.

"All the time! All over the world and all the time!" conceded the doctor, as though this made not the slightest difference to a human being.

"Isn't there a single minute when everybody is well everywhere?"

"Not a single, solitary minute."

"Then somebody must always be suffering."

The doctor nodded again; the matter was not worth speaking of.

"Then somebody else must always be sorry."

The doctor bowed encouragingly.

"*Then I am sorry, too!*"

This time the doctor did not move his head, and he did not open his lips. He saw that a new moment had arrived in the boy's growth – a consciousness of the universal tragedy and personal share and sorrow in it. He knew that many people never feel this; some feel it late; a few feel it early; he had always said that children should never feel it. He knew also that when once it has begun, it never ends. Nothing ever banishes it or stills it – that perception of the human tragedy and one's share and sorrow in it.

He did not welcome its appearance now, in his son least of all. For an instant he charged himself with having made a mistake in taking the child along on his visits to the sick, thus making known too early the dark side of happy neighborhood life. Then he went further back and traced this premature seriousness to its

home and its beginning: in prenatal depression – in a mother's anguish and a wife's despair. It was a bitter retrospect: it kept him brooding.

The chatter was persistent. A hand was stretched up, and it took hold of his chin and shook it: —

"There ought to be a country where nobody suffers and there ought to be a time; a large country and a long time."

"There is such a country and there is such a time, Herbert," said the doctor, now with some sadness.

"Then I'll warrant you it's part of the United States," cried the boy, getting his idea of mortality slightly mixed with his early Americanism. "Texas would hold them, wouldn't it? Don't you think Texas could contain them all and contain them forever?"

The doctor laughed and seemed to think enough had been said on the subject of large enough graveyards for the race.

"Why don't you doctors send your patients to that country?"

"Perhaps we do sometimes!" The doctor laughed again.

"Do you ever send yours?"

"Possibly."

"And how many do *you* send?"

"I don't know!" exclaimed the doctor, laughing this time without being wholly amused. "I don't know, and I never intend to try to find out."

"When I grow up we'll practise together and send twice as many," the boy said, looking into his father's eyes with the flattery of professional imitation.

"So we will! There'll be no trouble about that! Twice as many, perhaps three times! No trouble whatever!"

He took the hands from his shoulders and laid them in the palm of his and studied them – those masculine boyish hands that had never touched any of the world's suffering. And then he looked at his own hands which had handled so much of the world's suffering, but had never reached happiness; happiness which for years had dwelt just at his finger-tips but beyond arm's reach.

Not very long afterwards another conversation lettered another mile-stone in the progress of mutual understanding.

It was a beautiful drowsy May morning near noon, and the two were driving slowly homeward along the turnpike. When the lazily trotting horse reached the front gate of a certain homestead, he stopped and threw one ear backward as a living interrogation point. As his answer, he got an unexpected cut in the flank with the tip of the lash that was like the sting of a hornet: a reminder that the driver was not alone in the buggy; that the horse should have known he was not alone; and that what he did when alone was a matter of confidence between master and beast.

The boy, who had been thrown backward, heels high, laughed as he settled himself again on his cushion: —

"He thought you wanted to turn in."

"He thinks too much – sometimes."

"Don't they ever get sick there?"

"I suppose they do."

"*Then* you turn in!"

"Then I *don't* turn in."

"Aren't you their doctor?"

"I was the doctor once."

"Where was I?"

"I don't know where you were; you were not born."

"So many things happened before I was born; I wish they hadn't!"

"It is a pity; I had the same experience."

The buggy rolled slowly along homeward. On one side of the road were fields of young Indian corn, the swordlike blades flashing in the sun; on the other side fields of red clover blooming; the fragrance was wafted over the fence to the buggy. Further, in a soft grassy lawn, on a little knoll shaded by a white ash, a group of sleek cattle stood content in their blameless world. Over the prostrate cows one lordly head, its incurved horns deep hidden by its curls, kept guard. The scene was a living Kentucky replica of Paul Potter's *Bull*.

"Drive!" murmured the doctor, handing over the reins; and he drew his hat low over his eyes and set his shoulder against his corner of the buggy; he often caught up with sleep while on the road. And he often tried to catch up with thinking.

The horse always knew when the reins changed hands. He disregarded the proxy, kept his own gait, picked the best of the road, and turned out for passing vehicles. The boy now grasped

the lines with unexpected positiveness; and he leaned over and looked up under the rim of his father's hat: —

"I hope the doctor they employ will give them the wrong medicines," he confided. "I hope the last one of them will have many a rattling good bellyache for their meanness to you!"

Then more years for father and son, each finding the other out.

And now finally on the morning of that twenty-fourth day of December, the father was to witness a scene in the drama of his life as amazingly performed by his son – illustrating what a little actor can do when he undertakes to imitate an old actor to whom he is most loyal.

That morning after breakfast the apt pupil in Life's School had been sent for, and when he had entered the library, his father was sitting before the fire, idle. The buggy was not waiting outside; the hat and overcoat and gloves were nowhere in sight; and he had not gotten ready his satchel which took the place of the saddlebags of earlier generations when the country doctor travelled around on horseback and carried the honey of physic packed at his thighs – like a wingless, befattened bumblebee. This morning it looked as though all the sick were well at last; it was a sound if wicked world; and nothing was left for a physician but to be happy in it – without a profession – and without wickedness.

He threw himself into his father's impulsively opened arms, and was heaved high into his lap. Though he was growing rather mature for laps now; he was beginning to speculate about having something of a lap of his own; quite a good deal of a lap.

"How is the children's epidemic to-day?"

"Never you mind about the children's epidemic! I'll take care of the children's epidemic," repeated the doctor, pulling the long-faced, autumn-faced prodigy of all questions between his knees and looking him over with secret solicitude. "We'll not talk about sick children, but about two well children – thanked be the Father of all children! So you and Elsie are going away to help celebrate a Christmas Tree."

"Yes; but when are you going to have a Christmas Tree of our own?"

Now, that subject had two prongs, and the doctor seized the prong that did not pierce family affairs – did not pierce *him*. He settled down to the subject with splendid warmth and heartiness: —

"Well, let me see! You may have your first Christmas Tree as soon as you are old enough to commence to do things for other people; as soon as you can receive into your head the smallest hard pill of an idea about your duty to millions and millions and millions of your fellow medicine takers. Can you understand that?"

"Gracious! That would be a *big* pill – larger than my head! I don't see what it has to do with one miserable little dead pine tree!"

The doctor roared.

"It has this to do with one miserable dead pine tree: don't you know yet that Christmas Trees are in memory of a boy who was

once exactly your age and height – and perhaps with your appetite – and with just as many eyes and possibly even more questions? The boy grew up to be a man. The man became a teacher. The teacher became a neighborhood doctor. The neighborhood doctor became the greatest physician of the world – and he never took a fee!"

"Ah, yes! But he wasn't a better doctor than *you* are, was he? If he'd come into this neighborhood and tried to practise, you'd soon have ousted him, wouldn't you, with your doses and soups and jellies?"

"Humph!" grunted the doctor with a wry twist of the mouth; "I suppose I would! Yes; undoubtedly I'd have ousted him! He could never have competed with me in *my* practice; never! But we won't try that hard little pill of an idea any more. We'll drop the subject of Christmas Trees for one more year. Perhaps by that time you can take the pill as a powder! So! I hear you are going to attend a dancing party; we'll talk about the party. And you are going over there to stay all night. I wish I were going. I wish I were going over there to stay all night," reiterated the man, with an outrush of solemn tenderness that reached back through vain years, through so many parched, unfilled years.

"I wish so, too," cried the boy, instantly burying his face on his father's coat-sleeve, then lifting it again and looking at him with a guilty flush which the doctor did not observe.

"Oh, do you! We won't say anything more about that, though I'm glad you'd like to have me along. Now then; go and have a

good time! And take long steps and large mouthfuls! And you might do well to remember that a boy's stomach is not a birdnest to be lined with candy eggs."

"I think candy eggs would make a very good lining, better than real eggs; and about half the time you're trying to line me with them, aren't you? With all the sulphur in them! And I do hate sulphur, and I have always hated it since the boy at my desk in school wore a bag of it around his neck under his shirt to keep off diseases. My! how he smelt – worse than contagion! Candy eggs would make a very good lining; even the regular soldiers get candy in their rations now. And they don't have to eat new-laid eggs of mornings! Think of an army having to win a hard-fought battle on soft-boiled eggs! They don't have to do *that*, do they?"

"They do not!" said the doctor. "They positively do not! But we won't say anything more about eggs – saccharine or sulphurous. What are you going to do at the party?"

"I am going to dance."

"Alone? O dear! All alone? You'd better go skate on the ice! Not all alone?"

"I should say not! With my girl, of course."

"That's better, much better. And then what?"

"I am going to promenade, with my girl on my arm."

"On *both* arms, did you say?"

"No; on *one* arm."

"Which?"

"Either."

"That sounds natural! (Heart action regular; brain unclouded; temperature normal.) And then? What next?"

"I'm going to take the darling in to supper."

"Hold on! Not so fast! Suppose there isn't any supper – for the darling."

"Don't say that! It would nearly kill me! Don't you suppose there'll be any supper?"

"I'm afraid there will be. Well, after the darling has had her fatal supper? (Of course you won't want any!) What then?"

"What else is there to do?"

"You don't look as innocent as you imagine!"

"You don't have to confess what you'd like to do, do you? Would you have told your father?"

"I don't think I would."

"Then I won't tell you."

"Then you needn't! I don't wish to know – only it must *not* be on the cheek! Remember, you are no son of mine if it's on the cheek!"

"I thought I heard you say *that* got people into trouble."

"Maybe I did. I ought to have said it if I didn't; and it seems to be the kind of trouble that you are trying to get into. (Temperature rising but still normal. Respiration deeper. All symptoms favorable. No further bulletins deemed necessary.) Well, then? Where were we?"

"Anyhow, I've never thought of cheeks when I've thought of *that*; I thought cheeks were for chewing."

"Guardian Powers of our erring reason! Where did you get that idea – if sanity can call it an idea?"

"Watching our cows."

The doctor laughed till tears ran down his face.

"You can't learn much about kissing by watching anybody's *cows*, Governor," he said, wiping the tears away. "Not about *human* kissing. You must begin to direct your attention to an animal not so meek and drivable. You must learn to consider, my son, that hornless wonder and terror of the world who forever grazes but never ruminates!"

For years, in talking with a mind too young wholly to understand, he had enjoyed the play of his own mind. He knew only too well that there are few or none with whom a physician may dare have his sportive fling at his fellow-creatures, at life in general. From a listener who never sat in harsh judgment and who would never miscarry his random words, he had upon occasion derived incalculable relief.

"Anyhow, I have learned that cows have the new American way of chewing; so they never get indigestion, do they?"

"If they do, they cannot voice their symptoms in my mummied ears," said the doctor, who often seemed to himself to have been listening to hue and cry for medicine since the days of Thotmes. "However, we won't say anything further about *that*! What else are you going to do over there? This can't possibly be all!"

"To-night we children are going to sit up until midnight, to see whether the animals bellow and roar and make all kinds of

noise on Christmas Eve. We know they don't, but we're going to *prove* they don't!"

"Where did you pick up that notion?"

"Where did you pick it up when you were a boy?"

"I fail to remember," admitted the doctor with mock dignity, damaged in his logic but recalling the child legend that on the Night of the Nativity universal nature was in sympathy with the miracle. All sentient creatures were wakeful and stirring, and sent forth the chorus of their cries in stables and barns – paying their tribute to the Divine in the Manger and proclaiming their brotherhood with Him who was to bring into the world a new gospel for them also.

"I don't know where I got that," he repeated. "Well, after the animals bellow and roar and make all kinds of noise, then what?"

"There isn't but one thing more; but that is best of all!"

"You don't say! Out with it!"

"That is our secret."

The new decision of tone demonstrated that another stage had been reached in their intercourse. The boy had withdrawn his confidence; he had entered the ranks of his own generation and had taken his confidence with him. Personally, also, he had shut the gate of his mind and the gate was guarded by a will; henceforth it was to be opened by permission of the guard. Something in their lives was abruptly ended; the father felt like ending the talk.

"Very well, then; we won't say anything more about the secret.

And now you had better run along."

"But I don't want to run along just yet. It will be a long time before I see you again; have you thought of that?"

He reversed his position so as to face the fire; and he crossed his feet out beyond the promontory of the doctor's knees and folded his arms on the rampart of those enfolding arms.

For a few moments there was intimate silence. Then he inquired: —

"How old must a boy be to ask a girl?"

A flame more tender and humorous burned in the doctor's eyes.

"Ask her *what*?"

"Ask her nothing! Ask *her*!"

"You mean *tell* her, don't you? Not ask her, my friend and relative; *tell* her!"

"Well, ask her and tell her, too; they go together!"

"Is it possible! I'm always glad to learn!"

"Then, how old must he be?"

"Well, if you stand in need of the opinion of an experienced physician, as soon as he learns to speak would be about the right period! That would be the safest age! The patient would then have leisure to consider his case before being affected by the disease. You could have time to get singed and step away gradually instead of being roasted alive all at once. Does that sound hard?"

"Not very! Do you love a girl longer if you tell her or if you

don't tell her?"

"I'm afraid nobody has ever tried *both* ways! Suppose you try both, and let us have the benefit of your experience."

"Well, then, if you love, do you love forever?"

The doctor laughed nervously and tightened his arms around the innocent.

"Nobody has lived forever yet – nobody knows!"

"But forever while you live – do you love as long as that?"

"You wouldn't know until you were dead and then it would be too late to report. But aren't you doing a good deal of hard fighting this morning, – on soft-boiled eggs, – though I think the victory is yours, General, the victory is truly and honestly yours!"

"I can't stop thinking, can I? You don't expect me to stop thinking, do you, when I'm just beginning really to think?"

"Very well, then, we won't say anything more about thinking."

"Then do you or don't you?"

"Now, what are you trying to talk about?" demanded the doctor angrily, and as if on instant guard. A new hatred seemed coming to life in him; there was a burning flash of it in his eyes.

"Just between ourselves – suppose that when I am a man and after I have been married to Elizabeth awhile, I get tired of her and want a little change. And I fell in love with another man's wife and dared not tell her, because if I did I might get a bullet through me; would I love the other man's wife more because I could not tell her, or would I love her more because I told her and risked the bullet?"

Pall-like silence draped the room, thick, awful silence. The father lifted his son from his lap to the floor, and turned him squarely around and looked him in the eyes imperiously. Many a time with some such screened but piercing power he, as a doctor, had scrutinized the faces of children to see whether they were aware that some vast tragedy of life was in the room with them. To keep them from knowing had often been his main care; seeing them know had been life's last pity; young children finding out the tragedies of their parents with one another – so many kinds of tragedies.

"You had better go now," he urged gently. Then an idea clamped his brain in its vise.

"And remember: while you are over there, you must try to behave with your best manners because you are going to stay in the house of a great lady. All the questions that you want to ask, ask me when you come back. Ask *me*!"

The boy standing before his father said with a strange quietness and stubbornness, probing him deeply through the eyes: —

"You haven't answered my *last* question yet, have you?"

"Not yet," said the doctor, with strange quietness also.

The boy had never before heard that tone from his father.

"It's sad being a doctor, isn't it?" he suggested, studying his father's expression.

"What do *you* know about sad? Who told *you* anything about sad?" muttered the doctor with new sadness now added to old

sadness.

"Nobody *had* to tell me! I knew without being told."

"Run along now."

"Now I'll walk along, but I won't run along. I'll walk away from you, but I won't run away from you."

He wandered across the room, and stood with his hand reluctantly turning the knob. Then with a long, silent look at his father – he closed the door between them.

III
THE BOOKS OF THE YEAR

Dr. Birney stood motionless in the middle of the room with his gaze riveted on the door through which his son had lingeringly disappeared.

Some one of the world's greatest painters, chancing to enter, might worthily have desired to paint him – putting no questions as to who the man was or what he was; or what darkening or brightening history stretched behind him; or what entanglement of right and wrong lay around and within: painting only the unmistakable human signs he witnessed, and leaving his portrait for thousands of people to look at afterwards and make out of it what they could – through kinship with the good and evil in themselves: Velasquez, with his brush moving upon those areas of lonely struggle which sometimes lie with their wrecks at the bottom of the sea of human eyes; Franz Hals, fixing the cares which hover too long around our mouths; Vandyck, sitting in the shadow of the mystery that slants across all mortal shoulders; Rembrandt, drawn apart into the dignity that invests colossal disappointment. Any merciless, masterful limner of them all in a mood to portray those secret passions which drive men, especially men of middle age, towards safer deeps upon the rocks.

He had a well-set soldierly figure and the swarthy roughened

face that results from years of exposure to weather – a face looking as if inwardly scarred by the tempests of his character but unwrinkled by the outer years. Both face and figure breathed the silent impassiveness of the regular who has been through campaigns enough already but is enlisted for life and for whatsoever duty may bring; he standing there in some wise palpably draped in the ideals of his profession as the soldier keeps his standard waving high somewhere near his tent, to remind him of the greatness that he guards and of the greatness that guards him.

Not a tall man as men grow on that Kentucky plateau; and looking less than his stature by reason of being so strongly built, square-standing, ponderous; his muscles here and there perceivable under his loosely fitting sack-suit of dark-gray tweeds; so that out of respect for strength which is both manhood and manliness, your eye travelled approvingly over his proportions: measuring the heavy legs down to the boots; the heavy arms out to the wrists; the heavy square thick muscular warm hands; and the heavy torso up to the short neck rising full out of a low turned-down collar.

In this neck an animal wildness and virile ferocity – not subdued, not stamped out, partly tamed by a will. Overtopping this neck a tremendous head covered with short glossy black hair, curling blue-black hair. In this head a powerful blunt nose, set like the muzzle of a big gun pointed to fire a heavy projectile at a distant target – the nose of a never-releasing tenacity. Above this

nose, right and left, thick black brows, the bars of nature's iron purpose. Under these brows wonderful grayish eyes with glints of Scotch blue in them or of Irish blue or of Saxon blue; for the blood of three races ran thick in his veins and mingled in the confusions of his character: blue that was in the eyes of earlier Scottish men, exulting in heather and highland stag; or the blue of other eyes that had looked meltingly on golden-haired minstrel and gold-framed harp – eyes that might have poured their love into Isolde's or have faded out in the death of Tristan; or the blue of still other eyes – archers who had shot their last arrows and, dying, drew themselves to the feet of Harold, their blue-eyed king fighting for Saxon England's right and might.

They were eyes that could look you to the core with intelligence and then rest upon you from the outside with sympathy for all that he had seen to be human in you whether of strength or of weakness – but never of meanness. Under the blunt nose a thick stubby mustache trimmed short, leaving exposed the whole red mouth – the mouth of great passions – no paltry passions – none despicable or contemptible.

On the whole a man who advances upon you with all there is in him and without waiting for you to advance upon him; no stepping aside for people in this world by this man, nor stepping timidly over things. Even as he stood there a motionless figure, he diffused an influence most warm and human, gay and tragic, irresistible. A man loved secretly or openly by many women. A man that men were glad to come to confide in, when they

crossed the frontiers of what Balzac, speaking of the soldiers of Napoleon, called their miserable joys and joyous miseries.

But assuredly not a man to be put together by piecemeal description such as this: the very secret of his immense influence being some charm of mystery, as there is mystery in all the people that win us and rule us and hold us; as though we pressed our ear against this mystery and caught there the sound of a meaning vaster than ourselves – not meant for us but flowing away from us along the unbroken channels of the universe: still to be flowing there long after we ourselves are stilled.

Thus he stood in his library that morning when his son left him, brought to a stop in the road of life as by a straw fallen at his feet borne on a rising wind – another harbinger of a coming storm.

By and by not far away a door on that side of the house was slammed. The sound of muffled feet was heard on the porch and then the laughter of children as they bounded across the yard. As his ear caught the noises, he hurried to the window and looked out; and then he threw up the sash and hailed them loudly: —

"Ho, there! you winter snow-birds without wings!"

As the children wheeled and paused, he smiled and shook his forefinger: —

"Remember to keep those two red mouths closed and to breathe through those two red noses!" and then as he recalled some exercises which he had lately been putting them through, he added with ironic emphasis, laughing the while: —

"And when you breathe, remember to bring into play those two invaluable little American diaphragms and those two priceless pairs of American ribs!"

The little girl nodded repeatedly to indicate that she could understand if she would and would obey if she cared; and putting her red-mittened finger-tips to her lips, she threw him a good-by with a wide sweeping gesture of the arms to right and left. And the boy made a soldierly salute, touching a hand to his skull-cap with the uncouth rigor of a veteran in the raw: then they bounded off again.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.