

we musn't miss this pretty girl riding the great white horse. Her hair is yellow enough. She's going to jump through a great paper ring. The clown's holding it just right."

"Mother, she won't fall!" shuddering. "Fall? No, indeed. She has done it hundreds of times before. There, she's through—away she goes! Now a troupe of Japanese are coming. Jugglers, you know, Danny. Such funny, dark, little people, with queer slanted eyes and black satin robes with gold flowers on them. They pick their way across the sawdust as though stepping on eggshells."

"Funny little Japs. And they're going to toss plates and big silver balls and hoops into the air, and never let one slip. Joe Dobson, he—oh, mother dear!" Out in the center of the sawdust arena sat a group of red-coated men, their great brazen horns at rest, their eyes intent upon that single, upright figure. A silver cornet was raised. Out upon the hushed air went one long, sweet note, throbbing upward to the tented roof, onward and outward to bid that chattering audience "Be still." In wonder they stared and listened. "Paul Mauritz" had been but a name upon the show-bills. No one had guessed that he would play like this!

For but a passing moment, it is true, may one man's magic hold thousands bound. The moment lived, riders would leap upon their shining horses, clowns would tumble and grimace, whips crack, horns blare, the mad hurdy-gurdy of the circus go on. Yet for that moment no sound was heard through all the great tent, save only that clear, sweet, silvery note.

The little boy breathed deeply as though he would draw in the very soul of the music. And when the last tone sobbed and trembled and died away, he put one tiny hand to his eyes, then hid them against his mother's arm, whispering:

"Oh, mother! mother dear!"

In the storm of applause that followed, Ralph Merrill leaned forward. Almost

reverently he touched her arm. He asked, as simply as had Bill Smith—for he felt that he must know:

"His first circus?"

The little mother turned. With half-frightened eyes she searched the grave, earnest face. What she saw written there I cannot tell, yet she answered as simply as she had answered the rough ticket-seller:

"His first circus—and his last."

"It need not be!" The impulsive words were out before he knew.

"It need not be? Oh, you do not understand! You do not know that next year—"

"Next year?"

"He will be—blind!"

The whispered words shrieked out above the cracking whips, the brazen horns, the screaming clowns. He had guessed it in his heart—yet spoken, it overwhelmed him with its despair. "Blind—oh, no!" he protested sharply; then, when he saw the look upon her face:

"Won't you tell me all about it?"

His kind voice was not quite steady, yet, because keen sympathy was its undertone, she told him the sad little life-story—the impending tragedy of blindness—as simply as though it were but a lesson she had learned.

Widowed, almost penniless, frail, yet she had woven with her shining needle a gay little world where there was only Danny and herself. And they had been happy—so happy—till a terrible day when Danny had put out his trembling hands and groped his way to her, crying: "Mother! mother dear! Are you there? You seem so very far away!"

She had sewed and saved and starved. From one doctor to another they went. Always, always to meet the reply:

"He is beyond our help. The retina of the eye is affected. We can do nothing, madam, nothing!"

"I look into his eyes a hundred times a day!" cried the poor mother-heart.

"They are so clear, so beautiful. Will God let the light go out forever? Sometimes I won't believe! Then he tries

so hard, and I pretend not to know, and he tells me of the things he sees. It is a hopeless little game, sir. Some day it will break my heart; yet now I must be brave for Danny's sake. I must not make it harder for him—my poor, poor little boy!"

"But surely there is someone—"

"Yes, one. He is in foreign lands now, and his price—ah, sir, if I were rich my little boy need not go into the darkness, but five hundred dollars! It might as well be five thousand."

The words upon Ralph Merrill's lips were stilled, yet the light did not leave his face. When the last rider had disappeared through the velvet curtains, and with one accord the vast tentful surged down the rickety boards, he quietly took possession of the boy's hand.

"You must let me guide you out of the crowd," he said to the fair-haired woman. "People jostle and shove so, it is a wonder more are not hurt. Take my arm, please, I'll look after Danny."

They went out into the waning afternoon, this strange trio, the little boy clasping tightly to the hand that guided the mother close behind. They passed beneath the ticket-wagon. "Lord!" muttered Bill Smith, his faded blue eyes fairly bulging from the very red face.

When he had seated them in the car, Ralph Merrill lifted his hat, and pressed something into the tiny hand.

"I want you to tell your mother to bring you to this address to-morrow afternoon, Danny," he said. "You'll do it, won't you, my boy? Perhaps I'll have very good news for you both."

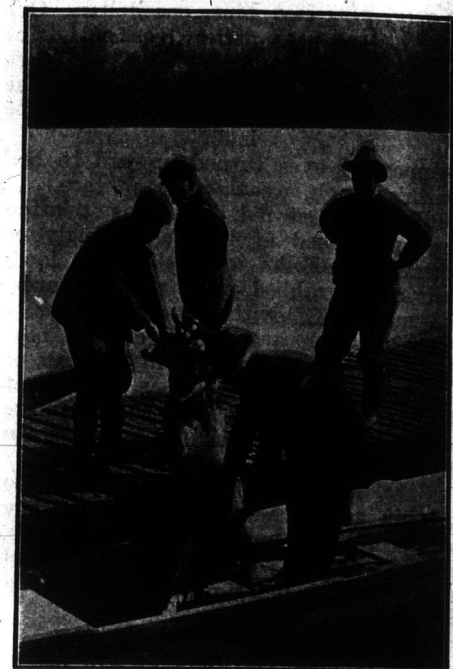
Passengers in that car glanced curiously at the little woman in shabby black, who held a small white card as tightly as though it were the most precious thing in the world. And some of them smiled kindly when they saw her hide her face against the boy's fair curls, though they could not hear the gladness in her sweet voice as she whispered:

"Danny, Danny—it is he. The doctor, Danny. The one, you know. And I'm to take you to him to-morrow! Oh! my little boy, isn't God good to us?"

Isn't He good!"

Danny looked up at her with eyes that were clear and blue and beautiful. He wondered at the great tears. Was mother crying or laughing? A little of both, had he only known.

"Why, yes," said Danny, "didn't you always say He wouldn't forget?"



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