

CHAPTER III.

Autumn went by. Christmas and the New Year came and went—and it was again March—four years since that eventful night when I had stumbled upon Dicky. We kept this day always as a festival, and I had taken Dicky that afternoon to the Polytechnic. We had dined in the City, and were now sitting in our favorite seat by the window, looking at the people hurrying by. Gwynneth had been on special duty, and unable to see her little son for nearly two weeks. Dicky missed her. I knew what vision was constantly before him—one in which I dare not for a moment indulge. We had been silent for some moments, when the maid brought in a telegram. It was from Gwynneth. "Bring or send Dicky at once; his father is in the hospital—dying."

"Get your coat and cap, Dicky, and come to see mother," I said, springing up. Dicky's face flushed with joy. In a moment we were on our way. Dicky, delighted at this unlooked-for ending to his festal day, chatted gaily on as we were driven rapidly away.

Suddenly he turned to me, and said, "Uncle! Would you *like* mother to come and live with us?"

"Yes, I should *like* it, Dicky," I said. "But we can't always have what we like. Try not to think of it, boy." For I was trying very hard, indeed, not to think of it myself—trying to crush the riotous hopes and thoughts in which I dare not indulge.

The long rows of white beds in the hospital ward sobered Dicky. He flew into his mother's arms. She was standing by the last bed in the ward. Another nurse, a doctor and a clergyman, stood near it—and on it was the saddest wreck of humanity I have ever seen. His head was bandaged, and his face looked ghastly against the white wrappings.

"Richard, look!" said Gwynneth, in a voice that trembled with emotion. "Look, here is Dicky."

But Dicky shrank back and clung to me. "It is your father," I said, seeing that Gwynneth was speechless. "Go to him and say good-night." Dicky had been too well loved, both by his mother and me, not to have been taught obedience. He went forward reluctantly, but unhesitatingly, and said, in his clear, childish treble, "Good-night, father."

The dying man turned towards him; and, for the first and last time on earth, father and son looked into each other's eyes.

"Gwynneth's child—little Dicky," he murmured. "Baby Dick, come here."

"Go, love, go," said Gwynneth, who had sunk upon her knees beside the bed.

"Pray," said the dying man, feebly. We all turned to the clergyman, a noble looking old man with white hair and beard. He put his hand on Dicky's head, and said gently, "Say a prayer for your father now, my child."

Dicky looked bewildered for a moment. Then he knelt down beside his mother, and said the collect with which his evening prayers always ended:—

"Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, good Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night: for the love of Thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen."

Then the clergyman's voice followed upon our amen with some of the prayers for the dying; and before we rose from our knees, the pallid clay was tenantless, and the troubled, guilty spirit had returned to God who gave it.

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Twelve months later, Dicky had his wish. I did ask Gwynneth to come and live with us—and she came.