

The thought of his fathers silent scorn proved too much for Sonnie. He felt that it was impossible to remain in bed any longer; that, come what might, he must, at all hazards, make confession, whether absolution or condemnation came of it. Fear of the darkness, of the shadows lurking within the room and without, of the long passage and the dimly-lit stars, was as nothing to the thought of the love he had, perhaps, already forfeited. He slipped trembling from between the cosy blankets, and crept fearfully downstairs.

The house was very silent. Even the stairs, undisturbed by his light weight, forbore to utter their customary protesting squeak, and he reached the foot of them in safety. For a moment he paused, and half turned back. But one glance up the gloomy staircase quenched his half-formed wish to retreat with his heart unceased of its burden. Trembling, yet eager, half-afraid to enter, and still more afraid to go back, he reached the study door with a rush at the very moment when his father opened it, a letter in his hand, and what seemed, even to Sonnie's eyes, a strange, unfamiliar look on his face.

Gilbert Evans paused and gazed at his small son in amazement.

"Why, what's the matter?" he said.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

"I couldn't sleep," stammered Sonnie.

"Couldn't sleep? What's wrong? Are you cold?"

But Sonnie, now that the crucial moment had been reached, was silent.

His father picked him up and carried him into the warm room. There was still another post, he reflected, and, after all, it mattered little whether his answer went sooner or later, when go it must.

Besides, something was certainly the matter with Sonnie. Now that he thought of it, he remembered that the child's face had been flushed; he had been strangely reserved and ill-at-ease before going to bed. Could he be ill? Heaven forbid! His heart throbbed passionately at the thought, as he strained his boy to him defiantly. If the child were taken, all that was best in him would surely go also. Life would then, indeed, lose all motive. Work would be aimless, ambition dead.

With a pang he realized how unskilled he was in children's ailments, and thought helplessly of Sarah's utter incapability. Why—why—had the boy's mother died?

Sonnie, meanwhile, happy in the security of father's arms and beneath the inspiring influences of light and heat, had forgotten the little outcast he had pictured himself becoming in the fear-inducing darkness upstairs, and was gradually regaining confidence and hope. If his crime was no less heinous, yet, surely, father's love was stronger and more forbearing than he had imagined. Gradually it became easy for him to speak.

Pulling his father's head down to him he whispered into his ear a full and unexpurgated account of the day's misdoings.

"An' I thought p'raps mother would be 'shamed of me, up beside the angels, 'cos mother said I was never and never to make her 'shamed. 'Sides a man doesn't cheat, mother told me."

Never and never to make her ashamed! A man doesn't cheat!

The words beat into Gilbert Evans's heart with a strange new meaning. From the lips of a babe he heard his own condemnation. And his code of honor that had grown lax to comply with the world's requirements, to whom all is lawful that is expedient, suddenly seemed to him a mean and ignoble thing, seen with the clear eyes of a child's innocence.

"Father." The whisper came again, more tremulously. For why was father so silent? Was he, after all, angry—ashamed of him? Sonnie's lips trembled, although there was no relaxing in the warm clasp of the arms around him.

"You isn't angry? You isn't ashamed of me? I didn't mean to. I didn't—really. But I wanted to—awful much. You isn't very angry, father?"

Angry! Angry with him! Poor, little, innocent, troubled soul! Who was he—he who had indeed stooped to temptation—he whom his own conscience accused, whom all honest men would accuse did they know—to be angry with a child? He gathered the boy more closely in his

arms and kissed him with an intensity that almost startled the child, while it made his little heart beat wildly with joy.

So father had forgiven him! More—seemed to love him as much as before! Sonnie nestled closer with a sigh of relief.

But the kiss implied more than forgiveness, although to Sonnie that was all-sufficing.

He did not know that in that kiss another soul, a soul more burdened, more troubled, than his own, had vowed repentance, had sought absolution, had seen its own transgressions in the light of his white innocence!

Holding his little son tightly with one arm, Gilbert Evans lifted the letter, sealed and ready for despatch, from the table, where he had thrown it, and, without a moment's hesitation, dropped it into the fire.

It burned very slowly, writhing like a living thing as the flames crept and licked around it, shrivelling and curling impotently before the consuming fire. And as it burned, so burned away, beneath the purifying flame of a high resolve, the false ideals that had brought it into being in the heart of the writer.

Sonnie watched with fascinated eyes the little tongues of flame leaping and spreading over the paper; wondered, too, why father stared at it so fixedly until the fire had died down, and all that remained was but a little heap of grey ashes.

The flames pleased him, and he was sorry when they had died down so quickly. They seemed disappointed at finding nothing else to burn.

"Burn some more, father," he cried. "The fire says it wants some more. It says it's hungry."

Father lifted him to his shoulder.

"There's no more to burn, Sonnie," he answered gently. "It was only a letter that father is sorry he ever wrote. The fire is the best place for it."

Sonnie opened questioning eyes. Father also, it appeared, had something to confess.

"Would mother have been 'shamed if she saw it?" he asked gravely.

Gilbert bowed his head.

"Mother would have been very, very much ashamed, my little son. But she won't now. She shall never be ashamed again, if I can help it."

Sonnie nodded wisely.

"No, mother said never, never to make her 'shamed."

Then, with a little nestling movement, Sonnie laid his head on his father's shoulder. Sleep had kissed his eyelids at last. Gilbert Evans bent his dark head over the flaxen one that lay upon his breast.

"We'll help each other to remember that," he whispered more to himself than to the child. "And may God help both of us, son o' mine."

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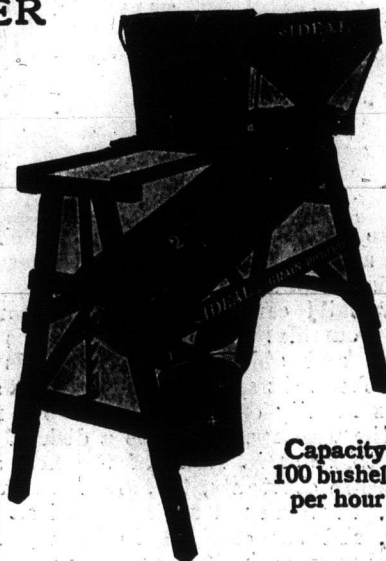
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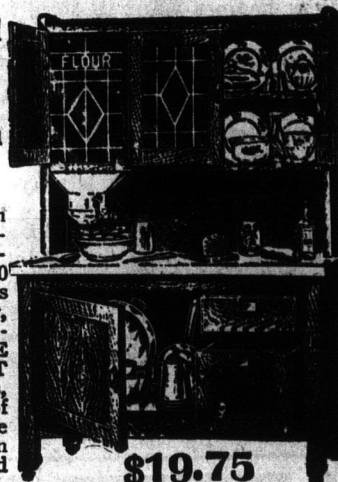
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