

he himself were soon to follow his wife into the Great Silence?

What of the boy then?

He had a few relations, fewer friends, none to whom his child could look for help. His wife had married him in the face of her parents' anger, and even her death did not bring forgiveness.

So he—alone—stood between his son and destitution. But for how much longer?

Already the trouble he had undergone, and the daily disappointments and anxieties of his business, were beginning to tell on him. The doctor talked warningly of a nervous breakdown and ordered rest, change, a holiday, advice which, in the present state of affairs, had small chance of being taken! Unless, as he had of late expected, the firm totally collapsed, and he had, perforce, to take a holiday for good and all.

But, on the other hand, if he accepted this offer, if he chose money and position before honor, and, forgetting all the many kindnesses his old master had ever shown him, elected to repay him with ingratitude, and deserted the sinking ship instead of doing his utmost to refloat her, what then?

The remembrance of all his own youth had missed, of all that he had hoped his son's life would hold, of the University he had never entered, but where the boy might find all that he had had to forego, might even enter the profession he had been, through want of means, forced to relinquish, rose before his eyes. No! The boy should never be hampered as he had been if it lay in his power to make it otherwise! All this and more! But at what price?

He knew that it would be dearly bought, knew also that had Dora lived her pure white soul would have preferred poverty to dishonor—even to that dishonor of which the world knows nought, which is only visible to man's soul and the Great Potter on whose wheel it was fashioned.

Still, in a world where the strongest wins, a world that by precept and example daily enforces the truth of the old saying, "That he may take who has the power," a world wherein he had only himself, only his own talents, to trust, to secure a foothold for himself and the child—would he in after years curse his too tender conscience if he let this chance of betterment slip by unheeded?

And the boy? Surely if Dora could see him and know, she would understand, and for the boy's sake forgive him!

He went to his desk, pulled out a fresh sheet of paper, and wrote his acceptance. Signing it hurriedly and without a second glance he pushed it hastily into an envelope, addressed and stamped it, and sprang to his feet with a glance at the clock. There was still time to catch the post, the pillar-box was just outside. A few minutes and the letter would be gone, gone irretrievably.

Involuntarily his eyes rested for a moment on the portrait of his wife. Was it merely fancy or did the face in the photograph lose something of its sweet brightness in that moment? Did a gulf deeper even than Death widen suddenly between him and the dead girl he loved? He dared not look again, as, with the letter in his hand, he turned towards the door.

II.

Sonnie could not sleep. He had screwed his eyes up tightly and tried hard to slip into Dreamland after Sarah, of the rough hands and the untidy head, having tucked him up in his cot and put out the gas, had betaken her slipshod way downstairs, to get father's supper ready. He had kept them tightly closed for what seemed to him an incredible space of time, until his eyelids refused to remain down any longer, and now he lay wide awake and trembling, staring into the darkness, the baffling darkness that shrouded each familiar object in the room in impenetrable mystery.

Strange, mysterious shapes lurked behind the wardrobe; a huge, formless shadow that in daytime resolved itself into the homely dressing-table stood grimly in the window—a nameless, sinister terror hid behind the half-open door! But not merely the dread of being alone and wide-awake in the awesome darkness kept Sonnie's eyes open. Something that seemed more dreadful, much more dreadful, to his sensitive little heart, than the darkness had banished sleep.

His child-conscience, what he, in his baby tongue called "something inside," was uneasy, because, to-day, at school, he had nearly cheated, nearly—but not quite, at lessons. He had resisted, but the temptation had been very strong, and the miserable thought that he might have fallen made his cheeks tingle and his heart ache.

Few children cheat habitually and as a matter of course. Some may do so through laziness, a greater number through fear of punishment for errors, but to earn the epithet of "cheat" is a misfortune not to be regarded with equanimity by any normally constituted schoolboy or girl. To Sonnie, with his fine instincts, his sensitive, self-accusing little soul, the thought that he had narrowly escaped deserving it became insupportable.

If mother—up there among the angels, but still looking down to watch her boy with loving eyes—if mother knew, what must she think of him? Mother, who had taught him that to do right regardless of consequences was the only course possible to a manly boy—a boy who was going to be a manly man! Mother would cry! With the vivid imagination of childhood with which he had been dowered in over-full measure, he pictured to himself his mother weeping in that far, radiant country, perhaps refusing to listen to the angelic words of comfort because her little son had wanted to pass, as his own, another boy's answer to his sums.

Childlike, he saw nothing incongruous in the picture! That mother could exist without caring for and loving him as deeply as before was to him a thing impossible!

And which of us, older and wiser as we think, can afford to smile at him?

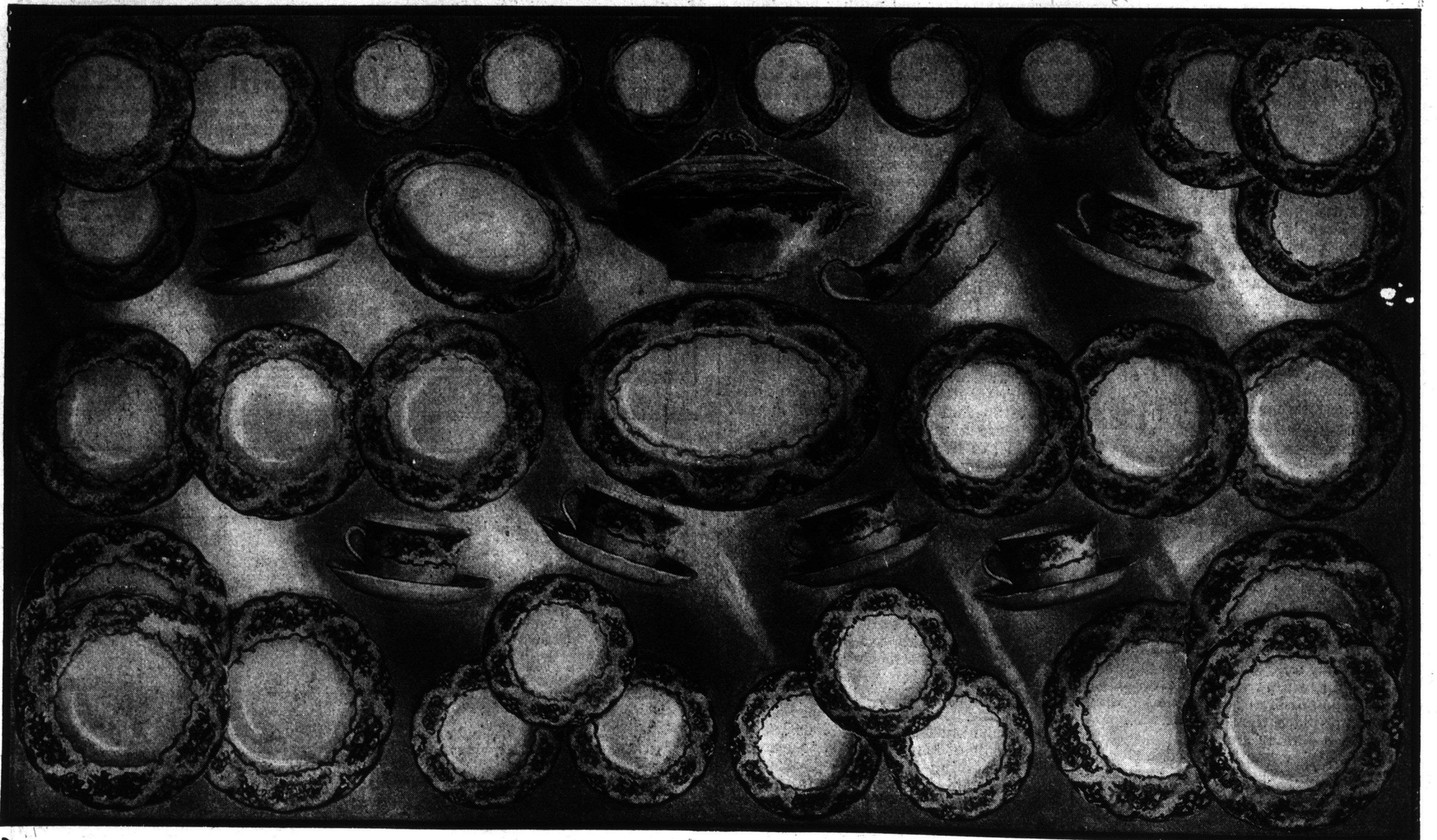
But if the angels did not wish to grieve mother, and if, happily, she did not know, there was still father—father, who, in Sonnie's eyes, was the best, the wisest, the cleverest of men, to whom wrongdoing was surely inconceivable! What would father think of him?

Would he, perhaps, refuse to take him out on Saturday afternoons as he usually did, for their customary ramble in the country—the country that may be reached by a tramcar—when Sonnie learned the difference between a beech-tree and a hawthorn, a blackbird and a crow, and father told him tales of the real, wild, countrified country, where he had passed his humble, happy-go-lucky, bare-footed childhood? Would all that have to be forfeited?

Even the precious bedside talks, when Sonnie did most of the talking and father listened, while Sonnie debated whether he should be a cab-driver when he grew up, because then he would get as many rides as he pleased, or a sailor, because it must be lovely to sleep in a hammock, or a drummer in a brass band, because the drum made such a delightful noise when you banged with all your might, or—But by the time the drummer had been considered Sonnie was generally on the verge of sleep, and his ambitions were merging drowsily into dreams.

Would this also be a thing of the past? Even to-night he remembered with an added pang, father had handed him over to Sarah much earlier than usual. Had he heard anything? Did he, with the semi-omniscience which children attribute to grown-ups, know? And while too pitiful to condemn, had he found it impossible to love any longer the little, hithonored, guilty boy, of whom he had been so proud?

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