

bed holding his hand in mine, he said, very gently, but grimly, "Mary wife, I think you must let me speak to you to-day!"

"I fell to crying as if my heart would break, and he drew a pitiful sigh that went like a sword through my breast; yea, I could not stop the sobs. Then Jack rose up from the little stool where he had sat so quietly that we had almost forgotten he was there, and came and touched me.

"Mother! dear mother!" he said; and as I looked I saw his face perfectly white, but there were no tears in his eyes.

"Mother!" he said again, "please go away for a little while. I can hear what father wants to say.

"You will think me cowardly, sir, but I did as the child bade me. I left the door ajar, and I could hear my husband's weak voice, though I could not understand the words, and then my brave boy's answers, clear and low; not a break or tremble in the sweet voice. And at last Jack said, "Is that all, dear father?" and, "Yes I will be sure to remember it every word!"

"Then he came out and kissed me with almost a smile, and went through the outer door. But an hour afterward, when I went out to the well, I heard a little choking sound, and saw him lying on his face in the long grass under the apple tree sobbing his heart away. So I turned about and went into the house as softly as I could, and never let him know.

"After it was all over and we had time to look about us, we found some debts left and very little money. It was a hard thing for me, that had had so long a strong, loving arm between me and every care, to have to think and plan how to make ends meet, when I could not even start evenly at the beginning. But Jack came to my help again.

"Father said that you were never to work hard, dear mother, because you were not strong, but that I must take care of you some way. He thought that you could let two or three rooms to lodgers maybe, and that the best thing for me just now would be to get a train boy's place. He said the men on our road would be sure to give me a chance for his sake."

"I do not know that I had smiled before since his father died, but when I heard him say 'our road,' in that little proud tone that he had, I caught him to my heart and laughed and cried together."

And I spoke to Mr. Withers about it only yesterday," he went on, "and he said that Tom Gray is going to leave, and I can have his chance and begin next week if I like. What do you say, dear mother?"

"O Jack!" I said, "how can I get through the long, lonesome days without you? And if anything should happen to you, I should die." "Don't mother," he said gently, for the tears were in my eyes again. But I would not heed him.

"And you to leave school," I cried, "and all our plans to come to naught."

"Father thought of that too," he answered. "But he said that the whole world belonged to the man that was faithful and true. And I promised him. You can trust me mother!"

"Trust him! Ah, yes! he had struck the right cord at last, and I lifted my head and dried my tears. Whatever unseen dangers I might fear for my boy would be of the body, not the soul. "Faithful and true!" I thanked God and took courage.

"It was wonderful how he succeeded with the books and papers, and the other things he sold. There was something in him that made him a favorite with everybody. I have been told by more than one that the sight of his frank, handsome face was like sunshine, and that people bought of him whether they wanted anything or not.

"Well, the years went by, and he grew up—working his way from one position to another, on the road—trusted everywhere. He was my own boy still, though he was so tall and strong, with his bright curls turned chestnut brown, and a silken fringe shading the lips that kept their old, loving kisses for me alone.

"It was not very long that he had had the place of engineer, which he had wanted so long. He had a day off, and was doing some little things for me about the house and garden, when one of the depot-hands came running up the path calling for him.

"Mr. Harding wants you instantly, Jack," cried the man. "The Jersey express should have left the depot five minutes ago, and the engineer has just fallen down in a fit. Curtis and Filch are both off on leave, and Mr. Harding says there's nobody left but you that he'll trust with the train.

"I!" cried Jack in a maze. The Jersey express: And I never drove anything but a freight train!"

"Well! well!" cried the man, impatiently, "don't stop to argue! Orders is orders, and here's a minute and a half gone already!"

"Jack seemed to come to himself at that. He darted one smile at me, and was off like a shot, drawing on his coat as he ran. In less time than I take in telling it, I heard the signal of the outgoing train and knew that my boy was trusted with a task that was used to be given only to the most intelligent and careful men in the service.

"They brought him back to me that night, sir, and I laid him on his father's bed; and, by piecemeal, then and afterwards, learned what had happened that day.

"The train starting out so late they were forced to make up the time somewhere on the line. So, on that straight stretch of track through the valley, they were making sixty miles an hour. The train fairly flew. Jack could feel the air strike his face like a sharp wind, though it was a balmy spring day.

"Then an awful thing happened! The great connecting rod of the driving wheel on the right of the engine broke. Jack seemed to live all his life over in that one terrible instant when he saw the end of the rod swing upward. It struck the cab under him and dashed it into a thousand pieces, and he knew no more till a horrible agony awoke him where he had fallen senseless on the engine.

"Burned and almost blind, with the flesh scalded and torn from his hands, he remembered his engine, with its open trottle, leaping on to certain destruction. He seemed to see the passengers inside the long train, as so many times in the old days when he called the morning papers in the cars.

"He knew how they looked and what they were doing—the men reading, smoking, talking of the elections, the price of grain, or how stocks went up last week: women, with crowing, dimpled babies in their arms, little children crowding to the windows, vainly trying to count whizzing telegraph-poles; young, happy people going on wedding journeys, maybe, and others coming home who had been long away.

"He remembered that, as he hurried to his place at the front, that day, a little girl with a cloud of golden hair had leaned from a car window to give one more good-bye kiss to her father on the platform. "Take good care of mamma, darling!" he had heard the gentleman say.

"The fireman—no coward, either, was Tim Harbrook, but with wife and babes at home—let himself down from the tender and escaped. So might my Jack have done. But he crept along the side of the leaping engine, carefully and painfully he swung himself into his place, and with every motion of his hands an untold agony, he reversed the engine and put on an air brake.

"Then the train stopped, snatched back from the pit's mouth, and they took my boy from his post—"faithful and true!"

"It was a long time before Jack's burns were healed. The road-people came often to see him—no men could have been kinder—and every week his wages came in full.

"But one evening after he had begun to get out a little, one of his mate's came in. "Come, Jack, old fellow, you'll be moped to death here!" he said. "You want a change. There's a big meeting of the road folks over at the hall to-night. I'm just on my way. Come along!"

"What sort of a meeting?" asked Jack.

"Oh, I can't say exactly—something interesting, they told me, and everybody's invited."

"He stole a queer look at me, and I knew he wanted me to help him. So, as I really thought it might do Jack good, I said:

"Yes, Jack, go along with Tom."

"But I'm not presentable with this face!" said Jack.

"Pshaw, man! it's evening and nobody'll notice. Leastways they needn't!"

"With a little more coaxing Jack set off with him. I had hardly heard the gate click, when the door opened again, and Jenny Brown came in like a sprite.

"Quick, quick, Mrs. Burton! Put on your bonnet!" she whispered.

"Where? What do you mean? I said, for I was frightened.

"She was tying my bonnet strings under my chin, as she spoke, and she had the house door locked, and me down the garden path and out of the back gate, fairly against my will. She hurried me across the square, and pushed me through the crowd around the hall entrance.

"I was out of breath with nervousness and fast walking, so we sat down in a back seat. The room was full. There were a great many ladies there, and on the platform sat the Superintendent and several of the Directors of the road. Everybody seemed to be whispering and smiling and looking backwards towards the door, and I looked too, though I didn't know why.