

His Son

A Complete Story by Annie M. Stewart

I.

It was a tiny room and very sparsely furnished. The floor, save for the hearthrug, was carpetless, and the boards, once stained brown, showed white and rough in places. At one corner of the fireplace stood an old desk, in the other a capacious and shabby armchair.

There were books everywhere, books of all kinds, sizes, and conditions. A small bookcase was crammed full of them; they littered the floor, the top of the desk, the table by the window.

The mantelpiece bore an untidy array of miscellaneous articles, from almanacs, torn envelopes, empty match boxes, and old pipes, to a child's broken toy and a dog's collar.

The whole room wore a desolate, dreary, lifeless look; the bare boards, the dusty furniture, the tumbled books, seemed to be waiting—waiting hopelessly—for the touch of some quickening presence, some gracious personality that should make of the dreary whole a fitting for its tenant.

Over the mantelpiece hung three pictures, the only beautiful things in the room—one, a copy of Watts's "Love and Death," the second a print of Reynolds's "Age of Innocence," and between these an enlarged photograph of a woman, little more than a girl, not exactly beautiful perhaps, but sweeter in her grace and youth than the cluster of flowers in her hand, she stood beside a tall rose-bush bending a little—with half-parted lips—as if to kiss her sister roses.

Behind, through the leafy foliage of June, against which her fair head and white dress shone with an almost radiant clearness, came a glimpse of a stately, ivy-covered, turreted house—her home, the home she had never re-entered after her wedding-day.

She had been Gilbert Evans's wife, and she had been dead nearly one year.

At his desk, beneath a glaring unshaded gas-jet, sat Gilbert writing, or, rather, alternately writing and tearing up what he had written. One or two books, which he had pushed roughly aside with his elbow from the top of the desk, lay upon the floor, their pages widespread, as if mutely appealing against such ignominy. One, a cheap edition of "David Copperfield" had opened at a picture of Dora, the "child-wife." It caught Gilbert's eye at length, and he picked it up and thrust it hurriedly into a drawer of the desk, while the memory of another girl, another almost child-wife, came vividly back to him. Involuntarily, he glanced at the picture above the mantelpiece, and as quickly turned his eyes away. For her name, also, had been Dora, and she, like her namesake, had faded early in the blossom-time of life.

A clock somewhere in the house struck the hour, and he looked up with a start.

He seemed nervous, irritable. Presently he arose, and, with a gesture of disgust, threw down the pen and, pushing the desk aside, flung himself wearily into the armchair. He sat still, very still, his elbows on his knees, his head buried in his hands, gazing moodily into the heart of the dying fire. So silent was he, that the hurried, thin ticking of a small clock on the mantelpiece seemed to fill the air with its insistency.

Yet, in the silence, in that dreary, commonplace, unlovely room, a duel was being fought, a duel which is eternal, the duellists the powers of Right and Wrong, the meeting-place the heart of man, and the prize—a human Soul.

And the strife was keen and bitter, as it ever is where the prize is worth the winning.

For Gilbert Evans had come to a parting of the ways, and as he decided now, as he chose the higher or the lower path, so would his future be. On the one hand, his old life, commonplace enough, perhaps, with its monotonous daily round of work and sleep; on the other, a new career, an improved position, where his talents, cramped so long, might find fuller scope, where life would mean something more than a constant struggle to make ends meet.

But gaining so much, what was there to forfeit? Only his self-respect, only honor! And, to a man of his stamp, these were no empty words. Gilbert Evans had been, from boyhood, employed by a certain firm of manufacturers, the head of which had shown him innumerable kindnesses, and had indeed, treated him more as a son than an employee. But it was a small business, lately a decaying one. Gilbert, however, had, almost by accident, stumbled across a new idea, which, if capable of practical fulfilment, would, he felt sure, revolutionize their mode of manufacturing, and bring back the prosperity so fast leaving them.

But, in some mysterious way, a rival and powerful firm had caught an inkling of the secret, and had begun experimenting on their own account. It seemed only a question of time before the efforts of the larger firm, with their greater facilities and more lavish outlay, would be successful. But one thing, the turning-point of the whole idea, was lacking; the shell the rival firm had managed to produce, but the kernel, the very heart of the invention, was known to one man only, the man in whose brain the idea had first taken birth—Gilbert Evans.

The rival firm stooped to bribery. Gilbert had heard several hints of what was impending, and when the offer came—an offer including a large salary and a responsible position, as the price of coming over to the enemy—he was scarcely surprised. He despatched his refusal promptly and considered the episode closed.

Then his wife died, and, in the anxiety of her illness and the awful anguish of her death, all worldly concerns were, for a time, as dust and ashes to him.

After, when life began slowly to assume normal proportions once more, when he found himself weighted with the heavy expenses which illness always brings, and with the care of a little son of seven years, to whom he was to be, henceforth father and mother both, some sane, sweet influence seemed to have gone from him, and in a desperate effort to make money more speedily he began to speculate, with what, so far, had proved disastrous results.

It was then, when things at the factory were not going on so well, when his employer, to whose aid, financial and otherwise, he owed so much, was losing hope, and his experiments were eating up more money than they seemed likely to produce in the immediate future that a second offer came to him, baited with more glittering lures, a larger salary, easy hours, a splendid laboratory at his disposal wherein to bring his ideas to full fruition! So much for his work!

And for himself relief from the daily drudgery of work-a-day life, from the deadly, dreary round of labor and sleep which was slowly but surely dulling all his finer faculties, his nobler aspirations; leisure to find himself, to feel himself once more a man, and not merely a machine, to live his life as he had meant to live it by the light of his lost ideals, to rescue his talents from disuse, to do something with his self.

And for his little son, what of his prospects? If he chose expediency instead of honor, ingratitude instead of gratitude, how would it be with the child? He was a delicate, sensitive little mortal, and Gilbert often feared that the life of the Council school, the only school he could afford, was becoming too hard and rough for him. From his mother, who had had gentle blood in her veins, he had inherited many dainty little ways of speech and manner, and these Gilbert dreaded he must inevitably lose beneath the ridicule of his playmates, to many of whom anything that savored of gentle blood was dubbed affectation, and to be well-mannered was to be considered beneath contempt. A better school, less sordid surroundings, and more care and attention than he was likely to receive from the rough-handed, if kind-hearted "general," of which the Evans household consisted, for the child, were surely worth seeking.

Or if—Gilbert had of late often considered this last possibility, probably because in the vehemence of his grief life had lost what it had for him—

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