



Don't waste your time in longing
For bright, impossible things;
Don't sit supinely yearning
For the sweetness of angel wings.

Don't spurn to be a rushlight,
Because you are not a star;
But brighten some bit of darkness
By shining just where you are.

His Father's Son

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

MRS. Priestley put down the cup of coffee at her son's elbow, and said hesitatingly below the chair.

"When you're through, Jim," she said slowly, "I'll—I have something to tell you."

He put down his cup hastily, and half turned toward his mother. "What is it?" he said. "Anything about Molly?"

"No, it's not Molly, Jim, your father's coming home."

She drew back a little then, frightened by the expression in her son's eyes. Her still rounded face lost some of its color, and she seemed to shrink in her plain, ugly calico dress. At the crash of Jim's overturned chair she put out her hands deprecatingly.

"Don't now, Jim!" she begged. "Don't carry on about it! It would have been only a year or so more, anyhow."

"He's not come easily to Jim Priestley. Like his father before him, he was a silent man to whom a blow came more quickly than a word, and whose rage was of the brooding, sultry kind. Now, as he walked past his mother and took his hat from its nail on the kitchen-door, there was no outburst of anger; only the straight line of his lips showed that her words had any effect on him. He was a tall, loose-limbed young fellow with heavy black hair and eyes that were almost childishly blue—eyes like those of the little old woman who watched him."

At the door he stopped and turned around.

"He's not coming here," he said, the very lack of inflection making his tone menacing.

"It's the only place he's got, Jim!" she pleaded. "I know it's yours now but where else can he go? You wouldn't turn your own father out in the street, would you? He was a good father to you for fifteen years, Jimmie." There was a haunting note of reproach in the thin old voice, and the corded, calloused hands under the dingy apron were twisting despairingly. "I've seen trouble," she went on in her strained treble, "but I never thought to see the day a child of mine would turn his father out in the street."

Jim opened the door with an air of finality; then he closed it again, and came slowly back into the room.

"He's been a good father, has he?" he sneered. "He was a fine one, he

was—a credit to his family! We're proud of him, aren't we? Ten years I've walked the street and seen people turn to look at me, because my father killed a man and was doing time for it. And if you think, after all that, that I'm going to have any shave-pated, lock-stepping, ex-convict in my house—my house," he repeated, "you're wrong, that's all. He doesn't come here!"

The painful tears of old age came into her dim eyes, and she fumbled in the bosom of her dress for a handkerchief. Her son watched her irritably with the unreasonable anger we feel at those we have wounded.

"Come as well as I do, mother," he said more mildly, "that Molly's people wouldn't let her look at me if he came back here. You know what her folks are."

"Molly wouldn't give you up, Jim; if it was her father, she'd stick to him. Everyone knows it was an accident. It was a quarrel, Jim—just the kind of a quarrel your temper may get you into any day. It wasn't murder. You know that Ragan had pulled his revolver, and it was his life or your father's. And he's an old man now—an old man, Jim!"

She dropped weakly into a chair beside the table, still set with the remains of supper, and rested her head on her hand. The young fellow stood for a moment creasing the crown of his straw hat; then he came over and put an awkward hand on his mother's shoulder.

"Just forget about it, mother," he said, not unkindly. "He spoiled your life and mine, and he isn't worth worrying about. He can't come here, that is settled. Now, just don't think about it any more."

He closed the door behind him quietly; but once away from his mother's pleading voice, all the wrongs of the last years, all the shame, all the covert malice of his associates, all the burning humiliations, came over him in a tidal wave of resentment, and the abb, when it came, left him sullen and ugly.

It was Saturday night. The corners around the market house and the city hall were crowded with men, loud-voiced and laughing, with here and there a reeling, tottering group, who punctuated their unsteady progress with noisy, bragging oaths. From somewhere out of sight came the rhythmic beat of a drum and the shrill song of the Salvation Army, and a waffle vendor was crying his wares,

with the metallic jangle of a beaten triangle. Through the crowds, Jim Priestley, his mind a seething whirlpool of shame and pride, walked alone, savagely brooding, brushing past women with babies and men with baskets, shouldering the loafers aside, ruthlessly deaf to the men who called to him.

When he finally met Molly she was not alone. Two or three girls were with her, and just behind them, keeping up a running fire of compliments and small talk, were as many young men.

"Good evening, Mr. Priestley," she said pertly.

Jim lifted his hat and passed on, black anger and jealousy in his heart. He knew the men; one of them—Hallowell, a mechanic like himself—had been his rival for Molly's favor, and had boasted that he would oust him yet. And so he swung along the street, his head down, seeing nothing of the crowd around him, occupied always with the pictures conjured up by his own brooding fancy. Now, it was his mother, sobbing at the table. Now, it was his father as he remembered him, standing to receive that awful sentence of imprisonment for what promised to be the remainder of his life. Oftenest of all it was Molly he saw—Molly, with her mischievous brown eyes, and sensitive red lips, and, finally, the face of Hallowell, his hated rival, would come between him and the picture of the girl he loved.

It was some time later when Jim, after standing sullenly with a crowd in the pool room down the street, came back through the market place. The streets were less crowded now; the late afternoon sun came home with their baskets; the sleepy babies were tucked in their beds; the butchers, after twenty hours of work, had shut up their stands and gone away. Molly had disappeared, and the percentage of drunks among the corner loafers had increased. Then Jim saw Hallowell.

The cumulative rage of the evening surged up in him and he addressed him. He walked up to the other man with the lust of battle in his face. For a moment each glared a challenge at the other. Neither had been drinking, but both were blind with the intoxication of passion. Hallowell greeted Jim with a taunt, and then, mistaking his rival's speechless fury for moderation, grew facetious for the benefit of the bystanders.

"Say, stripes," he said sneeringly, "next time you go down to the pen I wish you would have your father kick me some good. That make—?"

But Jim's heavy fist had gone home on the point of his chin, and he went down with a crash and lay still. Some of the men around stooped over his prostrate figure. The crowd began to grow rapidly, although street fights on Saturday nights were too common to cause much excitement. Jim leaned against a post with folded arms, disdaining help, although a policeman was rounding the corner. Then one of the men who had been examining Hallowell straightened up, and came swiftly towards him.

"Run! Get out quick!" he said, under his breath. "He's dead!"

Jim didn't run. He stepped quietly through an open door into the darkened market house, where he was just closing for the night, went through it, and out into the deserted street beyond, took a detour through alleys familiar from childhood, and so made his way home. He was dashed with the revulsion of feeling—too numb with horror to think of escape. He did not rouse his mother, but made his way over the roof of the coal shed to an upstairs window and crawled through.

For a while he stood there, the cold air blowing in on him, the deadly languor of reaction creeping over him.

Across the narrow strip of hall he could hear his mother moving about, as if he had awakened her. He brushed back his damp hair and tried to steady his voice.

"Go to your mother," he called. "I am here now."

He went to his own room and lighted the lamp. Then he blew it out again, suddenly. They would be after him soon, and he might want to get away—night, because from the chaos of his mind, he had not been able to evoke a plan for the future.

He sat by the window, leaning out, watching the street to see if he were pursued, not knowing or caring that it was raining, and that he was wet and cold. He could remember sitting there in the dark, every incident of his father's arrest ten years ago—the crowd of artists that gathered at the door; his mother's sobs; his father's bowed white head, and hopeless face. Then the long days of waiting, the trial and conviction, the appeal, which took their last penny—and failed.

Someone came down the street looking at the numbers. When he was opposite the house, he crossed the street and knocked. In an instant Jim was on his feet and at his mother's door.

"Tell him I'm not here!" he whispered hoarsely. "Call out to him—don't go down."

"He's not in his room," she quavered from the window, in answer to an inquiry.

The man below hesitated and turned away.

"I'll be back," he said briefly.

She turned to Jim, but he was gone. Back in his room he was turning over feverishly in his bed, reaching for his handkerchiefs in the upper drawer of the yellow-pine bureau. When he had found his revolver he went cautiously to his mother's door, climbed the attic and shut and bolted the door at the top.

He groped his way through the darkness to the window beneath the slatted door. The rain was coming down heavily now, close to his head, and the attic was musty and heavy, with the smell of drying soap. Jim settled himself on his knees at the window, the revolver on the floor beside him. Through all the turmoil in his mind, one thing was clear—he would never go to the living death of the penitentiary. The six chambers of the revolver were six sure roads of escape.

Below, the gutters were filled with water that sparkled and bubbled in the electric light. Someone was standing across the street, near the corner of a doorway, and Jim knew at once that the house was watched.

After a time the rain slackened, and the man across the street slid down on the doorstep, an umbrella over his head. Jim watched him steadily. He grew cramped in his constrained position; his knees ached when he tried to move. He heard and his eyes burned from peering through the darkness. Below, through the thin flooring, he could hear his mother walking. A sudden shudder on his new trouble he had brought on her came over him. He who had been so self-righteous, who that very night had refused to give his convict father a home—was a murderer.

When he looked out again, the man across the street had gone. It was dawn now—a cold, wet dawn, gray and chill. The rain was still falling, the chimneys of the houses around began to show faint blue lines of smoke in preparation for the early breakfast of the neighborhood. He heard his mother's door just below him, heard the shutters open, and the rush and yelp of his sister as it dashed into the little yard after a night in the kitchen. Then there were voices. He picked up the revolver and held it