

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## 'A Little Child Shall Lead Them.'

(By Laurence Brooke, in 'Friendly Visitor.')

'Mummie, has father come home yet?'

'No, dear.'

'I'se tired—oh, so tired and sleepy! My head hurts me so when I move it, and I can't keep my eyes open. But I want . . . to say . . . good night . . . to father.'

The heavy eyelids drooped, and the weak little voice trailed away into a weary sigh of disappointment.

For a minute or two the little fellow lay still, his breathing seeming to indicate that he had dropped off to sleep. But it was not so. Presently he opened his eyes again, and fixed them gravely upon his mother's anxious face. She was bending tenderly over him, hanging upon every breath.

'Mummie,' he said, as if he had been puzzling over the question in his own mind, 'why does father leave us alone so much now?'

It was a home-thrust to poor Mrs. Masters, though the child little suspected it. Her husband's neglect was a sore and bitter trouble to her, and weighed heavily upon her at this time of acute anxiety.

'Father has many things to keep him from home just now, Cyril,' she answered, evasively, as she pushed back the fair curls from the hot, flushed face, and tried to soothe the lad with endearing words. But there were silent tears in her eyes as she did so, and her heart throbbed with pain as she thought of the evil paths into which her husband had strayed.

The boy was only half satisfied. His unerring, childish instinct told him that there was something wrong, that the worn, distressed look which had settled upon his mother's face of late was not due solely to the fact that he himself had been ailing. And in his innocent heart he prayed earnestly to God for the father whom he now saw so seldom.

For some little time he continued to toss restlessly upon the bed, moaning plaintively as he sought in vain for repose; then sleep overpowered him, and he sank into a heavy slumber. The anxious mother continued to watch by his side; but the tears, which she had hitherto restrained for his sake, were now raining down her pale cheeks.

Poor Lucy Masters! Hers was, indeed, a sad lot! There was a time when her husband had been all in all to her, when their hearts beat as one. But he had turned from the right way; evil companions had corrupted him and led him astray. Worse still, he had given way to drink; and, as it invariably does, it had brought a blight upon their once happy home. Poor Lucy had often a hard struggle to make both ends meet, even to provide the necessary comforts for dear little Cyril when he was stricken down by illness.

Her husband's nature, too, had completely changed since he had fallen a victim to that degrading vice, which was fast enchain- ing him, and dragging him lower and lower. He, who formerly had been so bright and cheery, was now sullen and morose, neglecting her and their little boy, frequently not returning home until a late hour at night. Ah! how often she had sat up and waited with trembling fear in her heart for his coming! And what a pang smote her when she heard his heavy, un-

certain step at last, and knew in what manner he had been spending the evening!

Earnest, tearfully she had pleaded with him; begged him, for her sake, for Cyril's sake, to break away from his evil associates, and seek God's grace to keep him from his besetting sin. But he had resented it; answered her curtly, almost roughly, and went off in a temper. Gradually they had drifted apart, until a gulf now seemed to separate them.

To-night, as Lucy Masters sat there by the bed-side of the sick child, she reviewed the past with a sad and heavy heart. The future she dared not contemplate. What if their dear little Cyril should be taken from them? What if the one remaining joy in their blighted home should be removed, leaving it desolate and dreary?

She was aroused from these troubled reflections by the entrance of Dr. Hayward, the physician who had been summoned to attend Cyril. As he approached the bed, and stood looking down at the sleeping

she stole softly from the room, hurried downstairs, and sought out her husband.

'Eric,' she said, in a nervous, agitated manner, 'Dr. Hayward has just been here, and he says Cyril is worse.'

'Pooh! Nonsense!' he replied, scarcely glancing up from his desk. 'Hayward is one of those old fogeys who are always frightening people. There is nothing really wrong with the boy—merely one of those childish complaints that pass off in a day or two.'

'He is ill—dangerously ill.'

'Nothing of the kind!' he answered, turning over his papers. 'A feverish cold, probably, or something of the sort. There is not the least necessity to make a fuss about it.'

Lucy's heart sank. She felt utterly helpless to overcome this indifference. How could she move him? How open his eyes to the fact that their child's life was in danger?

'Eric,' said she, approaching a step nearer, 'will you do one thing for me? Will



WITH A SOB OF REMORSE HE SAT UPON A CHAIR AND COVERED HIS FACE WITH A TREMBLING HAND.

child, there was something in his face which smote a sharp pang through the mother's heart.

He said nothing, but his hand sought the soft little wrist under the bed-clothes, and when he withdrew it again his face was even graver than before.

'Is he worse, doctor?' whispered Lucy, even graver than before.

'I am sorry to say he has lost ground a little since the morning,' was the grave reply.

'You do not think there is danger, surely?'

'Not any immediate danger,' answered Dr. Hayward. 'The crisis will come before morning—probably about five o'clock. It is better not to disturb him now, but I will look in again later on; and if you notice any change during the night, send for me at once.'

Eric Masters came home earlier than usual that evening. Upstairs Lucy heard him enter, and, as was his custom of late, go straight towards his study. With a glance at the child to see if he was still sleeping

you just come upstairs, and judge for yourself?'

Something in her tones seemed to strike him, and he glanced up quickly at her. For the first time he noticed how white and worn she looked. Nor did the troubled fear in her eyes escape him.

Without a word he pushed back his chair, and followed her from the room. It must not be imagined that he did not love his boy; indeed, before he had given way to evil habits, Cyril had been the idol of his heart. But intemperance, among its many pernicious results, often warps the human affections, and leaves a man cold, callous, selfish.

As he entered the room upstairs Eric Masters stole a glance at the bed, and caught his breath with a quick, shuddering gasp. One look was enough to convince him that this was something more than a mere childish ailment. The sleep in which the boy was lying at the moment was so like the sleep of death that it struck a chill despair to the father's heart. And then, as his eyes rested again upon his wife's sad