

How Dan Came Home

IN TWO CHAPTERS.—CHAPTER I.

(By Liberty Hayward, in 'Union Signal.')

'I wonder what makes Dan so late to-night? He said he'd be home early.' Speaking anxiously to herself, Margaret walked to the door, and with eager eyes peered out into the night. Deep blackness met her gaze; nothing more; and no sound of voice or footsteps came to her strained hearing.

She had waited often for Dan of late, so often that she had become almost used to waiting—the weary waiting known to wives who have learned to sit in fear and dread, as they think of how their husbands may come home.

Not that Dan had come home that way many times; only just so many as to make her heart sink with the thought of how it might be, whenever he was late; and it was growing very late to-night—almost midnight.

Dan had never denied to Margaret that he drank. The thing that he denied was that he took more than was good for him. 'There are some fellows,' quoth Dan, 'who never know when to quit. I like a glass or so, as well as any of 'em; but when I've had enough, I stop.'

Nevertheless, there had come a night—he had taken so much he didn't remember what happened—and in the morning, on Margaret's forehead, was a cut, long, deep, ragged. She made no mention of it; there was no sign of reproach in her manner toward him, her eyes and voice were gentleness itself, but the sight of it was a sickening shock, and the possibility of how it might have come to be there was a thought so intolerable he scarcely dared to ask, and still—'Margaret,' he had said, standing beside her, as she sat pale and silent at the table, 'tell me how it happened. I know I had taken too much, but I can't bear think I did that.'

She stood then, facing him, and for one minute looked straight into his eyes. 'No, Dan; no, dear, it wasn't you who did it; I fell.' Then, because Margaret was used to speaking truth, the blood flamed up to her cheeks and rushing tears choked her speech.

Dan had been very sorry about this. He kissed his wife when he went to work that morning, and begging her to forget, promised solemnly, and of his own accord, that he would never touch liquor again. He meant it, and she, poor little woman, believed him; she was young yet, and, believing him, was happy—for a while.

But habits are strong, and promises weak; and the drinking had been for long a habit of Dan's, so that the scar on Margaret's forehead had scarcely healed before she learned what it almost broke her heart to know, that her husband's word was not to be trusted.

Sometimes (it was so now) there were months when Dan didn't touch a drop; then she ventured to whisper to herself, 'He never will again.'

She had felt so this afternoon; so safe and certain about him when, waving his hand gayly as he started to town, he had called back to her, 'I'll be home early to-night; have a good hot supper, for it'll be a cold drive back.'

The hot supper had been cooked, dished up, put back again, kept warm, till it browned and dried in the oven. The impatient children—four-year-old Daisy and little Dan, the baby—had been fed and put to bed. It grew later and later.

'Oh, I hope he isn't coming home that way,' sighs Margaret, and once more her dread drives her to the door; but still no sign.

Baby Danny, disturbed by the unwonted wakefulness of the house, rouses now, and his frightened cry brings the mother to the cradle. She gathers him in her arms, for it soothes the ache in her heart to clasp close to it the little loving form, and laying her hand down over the wakeful eyes, she rocks and sings softly the lullaby he loves.

For a long time she sings, as though with the tender words to drive away her own troubled thoughts. She lays the rosy little sleeper back in his cradle again, and still the waiting goes on. She has never waited so long before. What can it mean?

What it meant she learned just before day-break, when the sound of hurried footsteps summoned her to the door. It was a messenger, a neighbor boy, with the tidings, 'Dan's in the hospital in town. There was a fight in McLean's saloon, and Dan got hurt. I can drive you in if you want to go to see him.'

One glance at his face, white and horror-struck made Margaret instantly certain that the worst had not been told. She turned faint and sick, but asked the question quietly, 'Do you mean he's killed?'

'Oh, no, Dan ain't dead,' burst out the boy. 'He's hurt bad, but—Dan ain't dead.'

A cry of anguish broke from the lips of the wife; and the boy who had been charged to tell no more than that Dan was hurt, stood shocked at the revelation he had unwittingly made. A few insistent questions gave her the whole story.

It is a common story enough. We read it every day in the newspapers, and we shall continue, every day, to read it over and over again so long as the saloon is permitted to deal out that poison which lets loose the devil in the hearts of men. Only the story of a drunken fight, which, at its bitter end, had taken the life of a man and branded with the curse of Cain the life of the other. It was Dan who did the deed; the man who was killed was Jim Hains, the neighbor with whom he had gone to town.

'I'll go with you in a little while,' spoke Margaret, without emotion. Then entering the door and closing it, she fell on her knees beside the children's bed, and tried, poor soul, to pray.

She could not—not yet—she could not even cry. The door opened, and she roused herself. 'I'll keep the children for you,' said a sympathetic neighbor; 'you'd better go to Dan.'

Morning was yet fresh and dewy when the team that brought Margaret to town drew up at the gate of the hospital. 'Oh, no, it won't do him any harm to see you,' the nurse had said reassuringly; 'he is not so severely injured as we thought last night. He is sleeping now, but will be awake soon.'

'Nor hurt so badly as they feared.' The mention of his bodily hurt startled Margaret. She had forgotten about that.

She accepted passively a chair beside the bed and looked with hot, dry eyes on Dan's unconscious face. It was a good face; who could help believing in it to see it? She thought how she had believed in it; how she had counted herself the happiest among women, when, without doubt or fear, she had given her life and happiness into his keeping. And now the face which she had loved and trusted had become the face of a criminal—of—her heart cried out in protest. She could not utter the word even to herself.

He was stirring now, uneasily, as though

conscious, in his sleep, of pain. Suddenly his eyes opened, and he looked confusedly into Margaret's face. She tried—poor girl—to smile; but the pain and terror in her eyes startled him, and his spirit sank with sudden dread.

'Margaret, what makes you look so? Am I much hurt? Ain't I—ain't I going to get well?'

She turned so white, her lips struggled so as she strove to frame some reply, that he felt himself answered.

'Margaret,' he pleaded, 'if it's so bad as that—if there's no chance at all for me, I want to know it. Do they say I'm going to die?'

She shook her head, but still words refused to come. He watched her wistfully, his eyes begging for some assurance. 'Don't try to keep it from me, Margaret,' he besought. 'Let me know the worst they've told you—I can bear it better from you than to hear it from any of them.'

He had found her hand as he spoke, but as he would have clasped it, he felt that his wife shuddered and shrank away as at some deadly touch.

'I can't, oh, I can't tell you,' he heard her whisper wildly. He turned away his face, and the hurt in his voice was pitiful.

'I'd rather have heard it from you, Margaret, even—even if it's the worst.'

She told him then the worst—the worst that was so far beyond his imaginings; the worst, that meant not his own death, but a deed of blood upon his hands, and the stain of deadly sin upon his soul.

Later, he bore for years, without a murmur, the penalty pronounced by law upon his crime. But it was in the days when he lay alone with his thoughts upon his bed in the hospital, that he endured the keenest and bitterest of his punishment. Sharpest, hardest of all to bear was one thought that throbbed continually in his dizzy brain. It was so needless, so causeless—all this wretchedness that nothing now could change or undo. So little might have prevented it altogether.

'I'll never touch liquor again.' He had said it to himself and to his wife. Had he but kept his word, his life would have been kept in honor and in happiness. But he had broken it, deeming it a slight thing to break a promise, and the breaking of a word had been the opening of a gate that had let in upon his life and upon other lives, the floods of wreck and ruin.

The events that followed came swiftly. As often as some neighbor could bring her into town, Margaret had been coming to visit Dan, for she knew he would not much longer be permitted to remain where he was. His hurt was healing, and in spite of mental anguish he was growing stronger daily.

She came one morning with a covered basket. It held such things as Dan had liked best always, and she had hoped he would be able to eat them.

But Dan's room, when she reached it, was empty. He had been taken away, the nurse said, two days before. There was a note. It was only a line or two—a few abrupt sentences. Margaret's tears fell fast as she noted the weak, tremulous handwriting.

He had determined, so it ran, to make no effort to escape or lighten the punishment of his crime. He had seen a lawyer and had arranged to be taken into court at the earliest possible time, when he would plead guilty and receive the sentence of the law. He would not consent to stand trial. It would only exhaust what little money could be raised on his home, and he had no