



By Wells Hastings

Illustrated by
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MRS. OAKLEY TODD thrust her needle impatiently into her work and laid it down for the fifth time within the hour.

"James," she called, "James."

There was no answer, and with a sigh that partook of the nature of an exclamation she left her seat by the window, which looked down so enthrallingly upon the busy street, and pushed aside the portieres that separated the two rooms. Now, the small rasping sound that had first attracted her attention was plainly audible above the muffled outside city noises—a shrill, distinct little sound, and Mrs. Todd's rather fine eyes found at a glance its visible cause. Before the fireplace a little, black-haired boy was kneeling in a very ecstasy of intent endeavour, his thin back bent and rigid in laborious preoccupation.

"James," said Mrs. Todd again, "what are you doing?"

The thin, oldish face, that seemed mostly eyes, glanced across at her for a moment, but she received no answer; only the eyes flickered over her fearfully, then sought again the work at hand, and the rasping noise recommenced. Mrs. Todd, often as she had seen it, had never grown used to this look of still terror, nor had been able to read what it meant. Certainly the boy never acted as if he were afraid. It was always like this. If she called him he did not answer; then when she spoke to him suddenly and sharply, he would glance up round-eyed, look at her for a moment as if she were a specter and turn again to whatever he happened to be doing at the time. And the things that he happened to be doing were almost invariably things that Mrs. Todd particularly disliked. It must be admitted that they were things that almost anybody would have particularly disliked.

Now she left her place by the door and swept with pretty majesty across the room to bend graceful shoulders above the huddled, angular little form. With no very gentle hand she jerked the boy to his feet, then:

"James Bradley," she said, "you're a wicked, wicked, wicked little boy. What is the matter with you? How can you do such things?"

James squirmed and dug the point of the nail file, with which he had been at work upon the brass fender, through the loosely woven fabric of his sleeve.

"Give it to me," Mrs. Todd's voice was hard and cold, for the top bar of the fender was cut halfway through. "Give it to me, I say."

James put the file behind his back and scratched nervously at the mantelpiece. This was more than Mrs. Todd could bear; the shapely hand resting on the boy's collar tightened convulsively; with the other she struck him a staggering little blow on the ear.

"Oh," said James, "oh, oh!" and squirmed away from her grasp.

She caught him again in a moment, but he still held the file behind him, and for all her superior strength she was forced to scuffle for it until the pretty face was mottled with exertion and anger, and the piled hair toppled and disarranged. The file at last in her possession, she stood panting and speechless, while the boy fidgeted before her.

From time to time he snuffed a little, but it could not be said that he was crying. He, too, was out of breath. With one foot he made little crosses in the pile of the rug. Once or twice he raised a brown hand to the injured ear, rubbing it tentatively, but his eyes were kept upon the floor. Through her anger Mrs. Todd heard at last the placid ticking of the mantel clock. With an effort she brought herself under some control.

"What made you do it?" she asked.

"How can you be so bad?"

No answer.

"James you must answer me. Don't you know you're a wicked boy to do such things?"

No answer.

"You're a sulky, wicked boy," said Mrs. Todd. "You're to go to your room, and stay there. I hope your uncle will see fit to whip you when he comes back."

James sighed and walked slowly towards the door, stopping on the way to kick the leg of a chair. On the door-sill he paused.

"May I play with my cars?" he asked.

Mrs. Todd sank hopelessly into a chair.

"Haven't you got any sense of shame—or right—or wrong?" she asked.

James did not answer, but stood twisting and pulling his lower lip with finger and thumb. Mrs. Todd had turned her back on the door.

After she had thought him gone for two or three minutes and had begun to watch with absent interest the hanging out of an intimate "wash" in the cramped yard next door, "May I play with my cars?" he asked.

Mrs. Todd started nervously. "James, I told you to go to your room."

"But may I play with my cars?"

"Yes, yes, yes, play with anything you like, only obey me and leave me alone."

The little boy sighed and she heard him trudging evenly up the stairs.

For a long time Mrs. Todd sat still in weary reflection. Since his father's death, two years before, she had had many of these hours. Her sense of duty, if it was vague, was at least as strong as it was cloudy. And it was this very powerful, indefinite sense that had brought the perplexing care of little James Bradley into the Todd household. As a matter of fact, there had been no need that they should take him at all; for at his father's death Janey Carson, his father's sister, had actually begged for him, and Sam Carson himself had been much more keen on taking him than had Oakley. And yet it seemed to her at the time that she, more fitly than anyone else, should assume the care of her sister's child. As she pointed out to Oakley, Sam and Janey had their hands more than full already with their two girls (who had always seemed to Mrs. Todd very much of an age) and a house so overrun with dogs and various other miscellaneous pets that it always made her uncomfortable to visit there.

Now, as many times before, she found her sense of duty rather a barren comfort. There could be no doubt about it; little James was a disappointment. There was even a disquieting mental whisper that perhaps, after all, she was not carrying out her duty well. Of course she had seen that the boy was well dressed, and his food what the doctor approved of. She had said his prayers with him and tried to teach him his letters. At the end of two years she found that she knew no more about the boy than she had known at the beginning. She had known him to be his father's constant companion, and had naturally expected him to be affectionate and demonstrative—qualities that she considered as admirable in a child as their open display to be vulgar in a person of maturer years, and yet except for a natural little burst of tears on his first arrival, the boy had never shown much emotion of any kind. She recalled those tears now almost wistfully.

He had come, she remembered, a pathetic little boy of four, dressed in the outlandish mourning his father's devoted servants had chosen for him; and she had stretched out her arms to him, and after a moment he had run to her, to bury his head against her breast and burst into a little storm of weeping, the first the housekeeper said, since his poor, dear father's death. She herself was newly clothed in the garments of sorrow, and because she was not used to children and good clothes had always filled a large part of her rather empty life, she had shifted him ever so slightly that she might interpose her handkerchief between the new dress and the run of his tears. But at the handkerchief his tears had dried on the instant and he squirmed uncomfortably from her lap.

She evidently overrated the child's capacity for emotion. Her sister, she knew, had adored him, and she was quite certain had never even been concerned about the boy's evident lack of intelligence. She wondered now if all parents were equally and instinctively blinded to the open faults of their children. For the boy was not only sullen and mischievous, but actually dull. Other children of his age learned their letters readily enough; some could already read; but James professed an absolute and persistent ignorance of even the first three letters of the alphabet.

Nor could Oakley, who managed his office successfully and well, make any more of the boy than she could. Indeed,



"She stooped and kissed him and left him to his fate."



"He had come, a pathetic little boy of four, dressed in the outlandish mourning his father's servants had chosen for him."