

The Way of his Fathers

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drowsy bird-note overhead. But, most of all, he was conscious of the silence of the old house. He thought it would be equally silent when they were gone, and he was left alone; it was an accusing silence, and it pointed a finger that never wavered.

At midnight he could bear it no longer. He got up, overturning a porch chair in his haste, and went into the square, lamp-lit hall. At the head of the stairway his mother stood, still dressed.

"Bently," she called softly, "will you look up, dear, and put out the light?"

As he obeyed she was gone, and he was almost glad not to meet her in the darkness.

He sat by the table in his room and wrote a long, glowing letter to a college chum. It was full of what his life would be in the West. As he mapped out his brilliant future with strong, obstinate touches, he began to feel at ease again, and free from the reproaches of conscience. Then he lay down in his white bed, with its cool sheets smelling faintly of lavender, and fell into a heavy, troubled sleep.

He dreamed that he was traveling far, far away from the old home—thru myriad towns, built to the glory of great men who had gone before him; that he left them all behind, with his eyes on a far country that gleamed like a pearl thru mist. He dreamed that when he reached it at last, they were waiting for him, a great people, to hail him as a leader and a man among men; and he began to build a high wall of marble, and to cut in the stone laurel leaves and long inscriptions in an unknown tongue; but when he had finished, he dreamed they stood about it and said no word, until a stranger came and called it a monument whose builder had buried his own soul beneath it. And then, out of the silence, he heard his mother calling, and he knew that all things were as nothing to the outreach of her arms and the touch of her kiss; and he tried to

go, but it was too far, and still he heard her calling from a great way off.

"Bently, come! Your father is ill!"

He woke with a start, to see her standing above him in the moonlight.

"He is very ill," she whispered. "It is shock, or something—I cannot get him to speak to me. Oh, Bently!"

As he sat up he read the agony in her face, half thrown into shadow.

"Come," she said again. "Thank God that you are here—you will know what to do!"

She was gone again, and he was up, pulling on his shoes, and only waiting to light the lamp.

He bore it along to his father's room, to see the prone figure on the leather couch and his mother leaning over it. His heart stopped as he looked; then it bounded again.

"Wait," he said.

He had turned, and was hurrying blindly down to the office below, to his father's medicine chest. A moment later he was back again, fighting the battle for his father's life.

His brain had never been so clear, or so compelling. He felt underneath the shock and the agony of it a sense of mastery, a dominion of self, that guided muscle and eye. He told his mother what to do, and she did it promptly and without question.

It was apoplexy—he had no doubt of that; but the danger only quickened his courage and controlled his will. And then, all at once, it rushed over him—his youth, his lack of experience, his inadequacy to fight single-handed the battle of one so terribly dear, with the shadow of loss already hanging over him—this man whose chance for life lay in his hands!

"Mother," he said, "dress quickly—you must harness Magog and get for Dr. Baker. I'll work till he comes."

She obeyed him blindly. He could never forget her mute trust, her absolute belief in his wisdom. He fought back scorching tears from his eyes as he heard her go down the stairway and out on the porch, and from the window saw her reach the padlock on the barn door. A few moments longer, and she had

rolled off, the old buggy swaying along the roadway, until she was hidden from him in the darkness. He was thankful, then, that the horse was old and true and tried.

And then he was alone in the night, with a fire in his brain, and a prayer, dumb and voiceless, that he might stay the destroying angel's hand.

He lost track of time. He only heard the heavy, stertorous breathing, and counted the minutes by each breath. He lost all sense of proportion, everything was magnified, horrible, unlike itself; and yet his hand, measuring each powerful drug, never quivered, and his judgment never lost its balance. Once he saw a blue pallor steal over the rigid face, and he started forward, to use the last reserve at his command; and then, as the deadly color passed, he settled back doggedly, to watch and wait.

He grew to know himself, in those vivid hours, as he had never known himself before. It was as if, in the mysterious presence of this touch of the infinite, his garments of self love and self belief had fallen away, and he stood naked and ashamed. His heart melted, and he bowed before the majesty of this good man, whose simplicity had exalted him above the common measure of a lowly life. He saw, now, why the old doctor's people had loved him, and trusted their lives to his keeping—because they knew he would never fail them, but would fight their battles till he fell like a soldier at his post. And for his reward there was nothing that God decreed, or that the world could give, so priceless as this heritage of a people's faith, his consciousness of a work well done.

Longing to tell him of it, to speak to him, Bently leaned forward.

"Father!" he cried. "Father!"

Then, with desperation, he bent again to his task. A few moments later the heavy eyes opened.

"Bently," murmured the sick man. "My son!"

III

Through the gray morning they came to him, his mother and his father's

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friend, and found him holding his father's hand, dry-eyed, and with a slow-dawning hope in his face which Dr. Baker's first glance answered.

"Bently," he said, "thank God you were here! You've done nobly—I think your father will live."

And then his mother hid her face on her son's shoulder.

Later on, that same day, Dr. Baker came to him again.

"He will certainly live," he said cheerfully. "It's all due to you, my boy. If you hadn't been here—" His voice grew serious. "But, Bently, you will have to take your father's place. He will never work in harness again."

Bently lifted his eyes to the kindly face so near him. There was a new light in them.

"I can never do what he has done, Dr. Baker," and his voice broke a little. "But I will take his place, sir, and do the very best I can!"

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