

## OUR SHORT STORY

## "The Boy At Number Ten."

Teddy Mills and I became friendly the moment we discovered a common interest in the feats of our Majesty's navy. I, smoking my morning cigar on the Common, and he, evading his nurse at a moment when she was engaged in a debate of which servants never tire—"Mistresses and how to circumvent them," a question in which she had really no concern. Since the small boy had lost his mother—we would stroll intuitively to the empty band-stand, the nearest thing to a man-of-war that the Common afforded. Teddy was generally an admirer of a rather dogmatic kind, and I think that I was an underling—easy a misanthrope. The foreign foes which we together engaged in combat and routed entirely were past counting. His nurse called him a young Turk, and having done so seemed to disengage herself from all responsibility; he certainly was a little 5-year-old with spirit, but when he became too boisterous one could always turn to respect the laws of order by a casual word about his mother.

"You don't know where she's gone, of course, do you?" he asked inquiringly.

Mills, the boy's father, had warned me on this point, and I was ready with my answer.

"I don't know, Teddy," I said, "for certain. We're not allowed to stay in this world for ever."

"She must be somewhere," said Teddy, acutely. "I spot the gipsies know."

"I should think," I said, "that the gipsies would know as little as we do. Perhaps less! They never go to school."

"Don't mind me saying that you're quite wrong," he said, "for I know the boy's mother used to say when I asked her questions, she said: 'There are things I can't tell you, my dear little boy.'"

"Oh," I said, "then I've made a mistake."

"Yes," replied the boy. But you don't often do so. And look here! Spies you was a Spanish ship and I'd blowed you right into twenty thousand pieces with my torpedo, what would you think, and what—"

Teddy's father conducted an orchestra in London and composed a little. Teddy's mother, a good country girl, the daughter of a British farmer, had been the best of mothers to the little chap. When two months before the time of which I am writing she had given the world for a brief space a little baby, and had traveled away with the next world taking her new baby with her, Mills had become frantic with grief, pacing the house with his rather extravagant head of hair disheveled, calling out to her appealingly to come back to life.

"Too strong to last," said my housekeeper.

"Is, indeed, speedily appeared to be the case. In a night, Mills had given up public weeping and the composition of funeral marches and desolate whines; his grand piano went back to the familiar tones. In three weeks he took his usual life, and he bought a new silk hat in little over a month he had quite a cheerful men's party at his house, at which I found myself unable to be present.

He was genuinely fond of his boy, but his affection came out by fits and starts, remaining quiescent when other subjects occupied his mind. I spoke to him one evening as he started for his musical work in town, and he told me that the Crescent had taken exception to his quick recovery of spirits.

"That," I said, "is a matter that concerns you alone."

"Exactly!" he exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "The common sense view of the matter. That's my view of the matter. Besides, they must make some allowance for the artistic temperament."

He took off his hat and ran his hand through his thick hair.

"What is the artistic temperament?" I asked.

"Oh, you know. It's just a phrase. 'Is that all?'"

"Come in and have a smoke some time," he said, evading the question. "My little chap's always pleased to see you."

"He misses his mother," I remarked.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I suppose he does. Daresay he tells you more than he does to me. He's a mysterious little chap sometimes, and I scarcely know him—Wish you'd come across Sunday evening," he said, breaking off rather confusedly.

Miss Blanchard, I said, "I was with her aunt—the Miss Blanchard you know."

"When a man falls headlong from a roof, we think only of the hazardous character of his employment. It does not occur to us that thousands of men at sea or on land are hourly climbing to dizzy heights without a fear of falling, and that the real danger is not in the employment but in the weakening of the nerves and giving way of the muscles. That danger is just as great to the man on the sidewalk or in the office as to the man on the roof. When the stomach and the organs of digestion and nutrition are diseased the blood becomes impoverished, and nerves and muscles grow weak for lack of nutrition. More fatal diseases probably begin with 'weak stomach' than with any other cause. The first symptom of disordered stomach calls for prompt use of Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery. It is a vegetable medicine, absolutely non-alcoholic and non-narcotic, and is unequalled for the strength it gives to blood, nerves and muscles."

"During the summer and fall of 1895," writes Chas. H. Bergant, Esq., of Plain City, Madison Co., Ohio.

"I became all run down, my nerves and stomach were out of order. I wrote to Dr. Pierce for advice. He said I had general debility and advised Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery, and, thanks to you for your advice, I used six bottles and since I stopped taking it about one year ago, I have not taken any medicine of any kind, and have been able to work very hard, and I am now well."

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"The name is not familiar."

"She's singing in a musical farce of mine," he said, preparing to turn off to catch his train. "Rather swaggy, too. I think you'll like her."

I did not like Miss Blanchard, but that fact had nothing to do with this story. She was a dark, black-haired woman of the aggressive style, which seems to say, "If you don't admire me, I'll punish you." The aunt, who appeared to be not a real aunt, but one hired for temporary use, complained bitterly of the inconvenient situation of our suburb, comparing it in this respect to Kennington road, to its great disadvantage. Miss Blanchard herself had clearly made up her mind to become the second Mrs. Mills, and she assumed an air of proprietorship about the place that annoyed me, but gratified Mills. After all, it was not my house, and I had no good reason to be indignant until my friend Teddy was brought in.

"Teddy boy," said his father rather anxiously, "here is a lady who wants to know you, and who wants to be a very good friend to you."

"How do you do?" said the little chap, politely.

"Oh, the dear sweet child," cried Miss Blanchard, effusively, taking him up and dancing him as though he were a baby. "I simply dote on children."

She had the mingling assumed accent of refinement that is easily detected.

"I don't think," said Teddy, when he had struggled away from her, "I don't think that I like people who dote."

"We shall become such dear friends, Neddie darling."

"Don't correct the small boy," remarked Mills from the fireplace.

"But I don't want you to," said the boy to her quickly; "don't want anybody else ever to call me that."

There came an awkward pause, and I asked Miss Blanchard if she knew the neighborhood, a banality which can always be uttered without trouble. The lady, however, had no objection to the subject.

"I used to know the road by the Common," she said, in a way hinting that she did not condescend to know roads.

"Did you live near here?" I asked.

"The small boy looked round sharply as his father in speaking to her, used her Christian name."

"Don't ask me," she said, with an affected sigh. "My childhood was not happy. Being one of those who foresees aspirates in a sentence as a cautious hunter sees a difficult hedge on the road, I took breath at each attack. 'Three lumps of sugar, please.'"

"Isn't three rather a large number?" asked Teddy. The boy stood near to me with an illustrated volume of sea battles, and he seemed to be explaining to me. "My mother only took."

"Fortunately," interrupted Miss Blanchard, annoyed, "my rules of life are not necessarily modeled on those of your late parent."

"So I see," replied the boy, quickly.

"Surely," I remarked, goodly temperedly, "rather heavy cannon, Miss Blanchard, for such a small contest."

"The best to start children well," she said.

"Didn't your mother think of that?" asked the boy.

"I carried him off quickly to the other end of the room, because I could see that she was now genuinely out of temper, and that Mills seemed perturbed in watching the duel; the aunt did not count. We discussed the battle of Trafalgar, and I told her that the Crescent had taken exception to his quick recovery of spirits."

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whom he had that day purchased a new cricketing set, and gave me news. Teddy was in exuberant good humor, talking of prospective feats with the bat in a way that would have been slightly over-confident on the part of a W. G. Grace. We sat out on my square billiard table of a lawn at the back, and Mills talked nervously on a number of subjects; of the weather, of his dealings with a music publishing firm, of his newest ballads.

"By the bye," he said, suddenly, "I didn't see you, did I?" He asked for a reply to this vague question.

"Do you think," Teddy asked me, "that if I hit the ball very, very hard I could make a sixer?"

"Don't interrupt, Teddy," he turned again to me. "Did I tell you?"

"Of what?"

"Of my approaching marriage."

The boy stopped in a desperate swipe at a visionary ball and looked round sharply.

"I had not heard."

"Oh," said Mills, pulling a sprig of grass, "I thought perhaps I had told you. I am going to marry Miss Blanchard."

"Miss Blanchard, marry?" said the boy, very slowly.

"Yes, Teddy, my lad. You'll have a new mother then."

"Nobody," never wants more than one mother," he said deliberately. He placed the bat on the ground and came to the iron chairs on which we were seated. I think Mills noticed that the boy came to me and not to him. "And I'm afraid that I don't like Miss Blanchard at all."

"The point is," said his father, lighting a cigarette, "that I do."

"I don't," remarked Teddy.

They went home, and after a few minutes later Mills ran across to see whether the boy had returned to my house. Twenty minutes later still he hurried in to say that Teddy had certainly left the house after their return together, and no trace could be found of him. I went out at once to the Common shouting his name; Mills, now genuinely stirred by fear, ran down towards the train-lines and hurried on to the station, but he was too late, for he had become entirely dark, we were back at his house, without having found the least trace of the boy.

I found myself sorry for Mills during the night, for the boy, who had been usually the gift of dispersing his grief rapidly, he became over the disappearance of his boy a serious, quiet, regretful man. He engaged a substitute to take his London work, and lost no moments whilst he pursued his search. Posters were issued, hand-bills were distributed, advertisements were placed in the daily papers. Mills did not weep publicly, as he had done on the death of Teddy's mother, but I am sure that his grief was none the less sincere, and I know that the Crescent sympathized the more because of his reticence. We all did something to help him; a move to a new house, who had frequently threatened to write to the Morning Post if the little chap knocked any more tennis balls over on her lawn, took a four-wheeler one day, and drove three miles to a distant village, where he being possessed of the mistaken idea that Teddy was to be found there, Miss Blanchard and her imitation aunt came and wished also to join. But Mills, I was glad to see, begged her to refrain from interfering, and Miss Blanchard stalked away with a look in her eyes that promised no happiness for Mills. I heard afterwards that immediately after this she was quarreled by letter. Eventually she came down to see me, and as she intimated, but ten minutes to spare; that ten minutes she proposed to utilize to the full by demanding of Mills an explanation. A yellow van came about that time, and being possessed of the mistaken idea that Teddy was to be found there, Miss Blanchard and her imitation aunt came and wished also to join. 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