

The Way of His Fathers

By Alice Garland Steele

The old doctor sat forward in his buggy with the look of one who was running a race. And yet there was no hurry; he had half an hour to catch the four o'clock train, and the station was only ten minutes away. Magog ambled peacefully along the village street; he knew by the way the doctor held the reins that this was not a hurry call, so he took his time. And yet the doctor was galloping, in long mental strides—living over again, in a sort of rapid-transit fashion, the events of his son's life; for his son—his college-bred son—was coming home to stay!

His father saw him again, a little duffer, playing about the old white house, catching sunshine on the bare walls, building cars with the grave medical works in the well worn library, poking away the dust from attic rafters on some voyage of childish discovery. Even then Bently had been "up and doing," always going somewhere. His life had been a reaching out and beyond wonderful to the doctor, who never saw a longer vista than the arching elms on Main street; who never drove beyond Long Hollow Farm, where his district ended and Dr. Baker's began; who lived thru the years as he did thru the four seasons, unconscious that the summer of youth had given place to the winter of age.

Bently had been different. Had the doctor been called upon to define progression, he would have said proudly, "My son!" But he had always known it would stop in time; that the tumult and passion of youth would settle down at last to the green pastures in which the doctor had browsed for so many years; that the wanderlust would lead him in the end to the safe portals of home. So when as a child he had cried for the moon, his parents did their best; and a little later, when it had been "give me college," they had stretched the country purse and let him go.

They had been lonely years, but now they were over, and he was coming back to tread the way of his fathers. He had taken the medical course, and would stand henceforth by the old doctor's side, to deal out pills and powders; and in time he would come to that benign fatherhood which is every country doctor's heritage—the right to lecture and scold and teach and lead and make glad the whole countryside!

Magog drew up at the station, and the doctor fetched about with a start. Then he got out and walked nervously up and down the platform, listening for the shrill whistle. The ticket-agent came over with the privilege of old acquaintanceship.

"Waiting for the train, doc? She's a bit late."

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, I expect my son home to-day."

"Well, now, that's nice! But I suppose he'll be off again soon?"

"Off again? I guess not! It's for good, this time, Perkins—for good!"

The doctor spoke with excitement, for he hated the suggestion of more wandering. The ticket-agent, conscious that he had blundered, took off his cap and examined its worn patent-leather peak; then he blew his nose with a red handkerchief.

"That's nice for you and the missis. What's he going to do—set up store? I heard Sam Walker say he was intending to sell out, and I guessed right away that your Bently—"

"No, sir!" broke in the doctor. "I sha'n't have my son in any store." He cleared his throat. "He'll be right in the office with me—yes, sir, in my office!"

The agent reddened.

"Well, it's lucky to have a business all ready made and waiting for you, ain't it? But he'll never be you, doc."

The doctor waved away the implied compliment.

"He will go ahead of me, Perkins. It's young blood we need nowadays. There she comes now!"

He stood back as the train puffed in,

his eyes eagerly searching the smoke-grimed windows. When he caught sight of Bently he pushed forward.

"Son!"

"Oh, hello, dad!" Bently dragged at his suitcase, and put out a cool, gloved hand. "Glad to see you! Didn't know you'd be down. Thought some old-duffer would need a plaster or a pill just at four o'clock. What made 'em considerate enough to put it off?"

The doctor smilingly led the way to the buggy.

"Oh, I got away. Everybody's pretty well just now—except old Mrs. Hall at the Cove." He sighed a little; his people were bone of his bone. "That's right—put in your bag at the back. How about your trunk?"

The dapper figure in blue serge paused.

"Oh, that's all right—I didn't bring any."

"Didn't bring any?"

"No—this was enough. I've got a change or two in here, and there are some togs at the house if I need extras. How's the little mater, dad?"

The doctor gathered up the reins slowly, under a sudden cloud of depression.

"She's not so well, Bently. She's

dread miles, such a long way! But, oh, Bently, it's so good to have you home again!"

"Yes," he said, "It's very nice, mater."

He was thinking that he had never noticed so much as now how plain and worn the room was—the melodeon, in one corner, the battered bookcases and the cheap little lamp, and the few discolored engravings in unbecomingly frames. Thru it all he read his mother's joy, and it seemed extravagant and far-fetched to him; he had learned at college the art of self-control, and these emotions were too bare, too vivid, to his fastidious fancy.

"I wonder," he said, lightly, "who first got country towns into the melodeon habit, mater? I'd as soon listen to a mouth organ!"

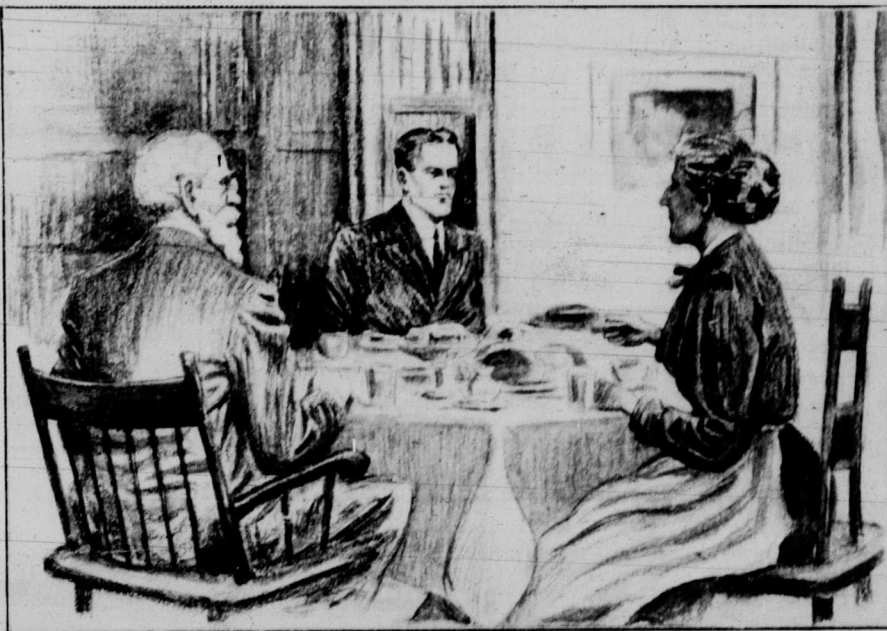
His mother smiled.

"I've never thought about it, Bently. It is funny; but, then, so few play, and they are sweet; the old hymns—"

"Oh, yes," he laughed, "they're first rate at camp-meetings."

Then, with a regret that he had been critical, he began to speak of the class day exercises, and of the girls he had met at the "senior prom."

His mother listened eagerly.



"He could see his mother's hand everywhere"

lonely, I guess; but now you're back, she'll improve right along."

The young man was looking with critical eyes at the old landmarks they passed.

"Poor mater, I haven't written to her half often enough. Say, dad, this town hasn't changed since the Pilgrim Fathers landed. Why doesn't Jim Squires put a new roof on his barn?"

"It's been a pretty heavy year, and most of the crops failed."

Bently yawned.

"The old story! If a farmer just missed heaven, he'd blame it on the crops!"

The doctor shook his head.

"It's hard to get along, my boy, sometimes." He was thinking of the hole Bently's college bills had eaten in his own little hoard; but he smiled suddenly, he had been so glad to do it, so proud!

"Magog's getting old," said Bently. "Can't you whip him up a trifle, dad?"

The doctor would almost as soon have whipped Bently as Magog, but he gave the lines a gentle little pull, and Magog, surprised from inaction, started into the trot he used for hurry calls. Ten minutes later Bently was with his mother in the library. He sat on the haircloth sofa, smoothing his kid gloves on his knee, while his mother hovered over him, trying to hide her tearful gladness.

"Are you tired, dearie? Four hun-

It will seem quiet to you here, just at first, dear, after all that; but there are some nice girls here, too."

She touched a bowl of pansies on the desk. "Dorothy Hardin brought them for you this morning, from her garden."

He got up, strolling to the window.

"Why, dad is putting up the horse himself. Where's the Jones boy?"

His mother hesitated.

"Oh, he left us last winter. It was money, Bently; and, besides, they wanted him to go on with school. Your father doesn't mind so much, now that it's good weather; but he isn't young any longer, and the strain—I was quite worried in December—"

Bently flung his head back.

"Oh, dad's all right!"

He watched the doctor coming slowly up the pathway. His face was flushed, and the iron gray hair showed silver on the temples; even a cursory glance proved him older. Bently turned away awkwardly. He felt as if resistless fingers were probing out the tender places in his soul. It gave him a feeling of impatience; these too intimate hours were trying to a man's calm—they jarred life out of its usual peaceful proportion.

His father came in, a proud light in his eyes as he saw them together.

"Well," he said, "Bently, I'm glad you're home, boy! I met the Lawson girls today—they're planning all kinds of good times; but I guess you're used

to being lionized. They told me of a couple of picnics next week, and a trip to Bridal Veil the week after, and a barn dance;" but Bently was speaking, and he stopped.

"I shall not be here the week after." The young man laughed a little, to break the edge of the announcement.

"Why, Bently," his mother said rather faintly, "you talk as if you were on a visit!"

Her son turned from her startled gaze.

"Yes, I've got to get away then. There's a chap going West—his uncle owns an electrical plant out there, and I've decided to go into it."

"Bently!"

Over the bridge of their common hope the doctor sought his wife's eyes; the light in them had gone out. He felt suddenly old and helpless.

"Bently, we have planned that you should go into the office with me!"

The young man turned on him hotly.

"I know, you've done what you had no right to do—built another man's future. I've wasted years on rule and formula, on dried herbs as shriveled as your own life has been! What have you ever done for the world? What have you made yourself? A slave at the beck and call of every rheumatic old woman and weak-kneed child in the village! I tell you, father, I've come to my senses. I've been offered a good thing, and I'm going to take it!"

There was a silence. Then his mother spoke.

"Bently," she said, "would you mind putting off the discussion till tomorrow? Your father is too tired to be worried tonight."

Without a word he turned to the door. He felt miserably conscious of his victory—the victory of the strong over the weak.

"I'm sorry, mother," he said hesitantly. "If you will look at it from my side—"

His mother put out her hand. "We'll try, dear," was all she said.

"I'll go up," he said. "Is my room ready? I've got letters to write—"

"It's ready, Bently. You'll find everything"—her voice broke a little—"just as it always has been."

He went from them, their bent, gray figures dimly outlined in the twilight.

II

At the tea-table there were few words. The atmosphere was heavy, oppressive, with the heat of early June. Out thru the open window Bently could see an aspen quivering, tho there was no wind; and the garden seemed full of hushed, fanciful noises, the murmur of shy, wild things. He could see his mother's hand everywhere—the homemade cake, with the frosting he had hungered for as a boy, the strawberries from the little patch of garden, the mignonette and sweet-william set near his plate. He could hardly touch anything, nor dwell upon these tributes to his homecoming.

Afterward, as they sat a silent trio on the porch, watching a world glorified by moonlight, he felt that he could stand anything better than this still atmosphere of their love—and disappointment. Once in a while his mother would tax him with a gentle question, but somehow the personal note was left out. He was a thing apart—beloved, but separate.

At ten o'clock she rose and went to his father's side.

"Dear," she said, "you've had a long day." She turned apologetically to Bently. "He was up at five," she explained, "to see old Mrs. Hall, at the Cove; he rode twenty miles before breakfast."

With a whispered "Good night" they left him, and went in together. He sat there alone a long time, counting the stars and watching the long shadows the trees cast on the grass. He heard the incessant hum of crickets, and the murmur of katydids, and an occasional

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