

'DIE—WHICH I WON'T!'

A MEMORY.

(By Margaret Sutton Briscoe.)

'But am I going to die, mother?'

'Why do you ask, my darling? Do you feel as if you were?'

'I don't know, mother. I never died before. Father, you tell me.'

'Nonsense!' said the physician. 'Of course you are not dying. Here, take your medicine like a good child, and get well.'

Jere turned away fretfully. 'No, I am not going to take any more. I am going to die.'

'Take your medicine at once, my child,' said a steady voice; and the boy, opening his lips mechanically, obeyed. Mr. Barton followed the physician into the adjoining room.

'Is there a chance?' he asked.

The doctor was looking grave and annoyed. 'There was,' he replied. 'Who has been talking in the room? How has this idea taken hold of him?'

'No one has suggested it. Jere was always a precocious child, you know.'

'Yes; but if we are going to have this restlessness and fear to fight as well, why, then—'

'There is no hope?'

'None. You may find means to soothe him. If not—well, do what you can. I shall return shortly, for my part.'

Jere looked down at his father's hands, as they lay on the pillow near him. They were not so white, or so soft, or so small as his mother's, and the nails were not so pretty and pink; but he liked to feel them lift him about in the bed, and they refreshed him when they lay on his forehead. He moved now so that his cheek touched the back of one of them.

'There's father hands and mother hands, isn't there?' he said. 'Father, you'll tell me the truth. Am I going to die?'

Mr. Barton sat down on the side of the bed, and gathered his boy into his arm, lifting the hot restless head upon his shoulder.

'Jere, you like to hear father's stories, don't you? I am going to tell you one.'

'I used to like them when I wasn't dying. I don't know now.'

'A story of when I was a boy.'

Jere nestled his forehead against his father's throat. 'Lift up your head the littlest bit, father. I like the feel of your beard.'

Mrs. Barton rose quickly, and walked over to the window, looking out at a landscape which she did not see.

'When I was a boy—' began Mr. Barton.

'Yes, that's the kind of story that's best. Begin at the very beginning, father.'

'When I was a boy, there was a great war going on. I am not going to tell you about that, though. My story is of one of its soldiers, and I don't think he knew much more of the rights and wrongs of it than you would.'

'You didn't fight, father?'

'No; I was very little older than you are. But one of the fiercest of the battle-fields was near our old home, and after the fight was over, your grandfather, with all the men left on the farm, went out to help the wounded. The old country doctor went along too.'

'It was a dark night. They had to go out with lanterns, and so I slipped through the door behind them, keeping in the shadow. The first soldier they ran across was lying on his face. One of the men turned him over, and somebody held a lantern while the doctor examined him.'

'"Dead!" said the doctor, with a nod.'

'Then they all went on, I creeping after them softly. On my way I had to pass quite close by the dead soldier, and suddenly I nearly jumped out of my boots, for I thought I heard a moan. I was so frightened that my heart stood as still as I did. I walked over to the soldier's side, my heart going thump, thump, thump! When I got to him, there was no doubt about it. I heard another moan. And this time I was too scared to run, but I yelled, "Father!" as loud as I could.'

'Yes, that's just what I would have

done,' said Jere; and his father drew him closer as he went on.

'My father and the doctor came running back. They were frightened too, for they knew my voice.'

'"What's all this?" said the doctor, and then I told him that the man he had said was dead was not dead at all, that I had heard him moaning. The men came up with their lanterns; and the doctor made another examination. The soldier's leg was broken, and there was a big hole in his chest.'

'"He's as good as dead," said the doctor. "Here, Tom Barton, you scamper home. There are plenty of men on the field to save, and there's no time to lose."

But I cried and begged father not to desert my soldier. At last he told me that he would leave one of the men with me, and I might stay by the soldier until he died.

'"He's dead now, I believe," said the doctor, flashing his lantern on the man's face.'

'And as he spoke, the man opened his eyes, and said quite distinctly, through his set teeth, "Die—which I won't!"'

'The doctor burst out laughing, knelt down again, opened the man's shirt, and staunched the blood oozing from the hole in his chest. The

big bonnet pins. When I turned around the soldier's eyes were open, and he lay staring at me.'

'I thought he was too ill to understand, for mammy said he was; but when the doctor came in and bent over him, my soldier was too weak to lift his hand, but with the slowest movement you ever saw he raised his finger and pointed to "Die—which I won't!"'

'The doctor looked down at the footboard and spelled the words out. Then he looked at me. "Well, you are a pair of you," he said. And he burst out laughing again. I used to think the doctor the most heartless being that ever lived in those days. Now I understand him, and I know how much better it is to laugh than to cry.'

'Even when people are dying?'

'Yes; even when people are dying, if the laugh is the right kind.'

'"You ought to be dead by rights," said the doctor; "but as you are not—"

'Wait a minute, father. Don't go on yet. I'd like one.'

'One what, my boy?'

'A "Die—which I won't!"'

The figure at the window moved suddenly.

'What do you mean, my child?' asked Mr. Barton.



MRS. BARTON ROSE QUICKLY AND WALKED OVER TO THE WINDOW.

soldier's eyes had closed, and he was breathing painfully, with long rests between.'

'I sat down on the ground and took the soldier's head on my knee, every now and then wetting his lips as the doctor had showed me, and dripping some of the stuff between them.'

The nurse came forward with the medicine, but Jere turned from her impatiently.

'You wet my lips with it, father, and drip it in, like you did the man.'

Mr. Barton took the cup, moistening the child's lips with the contents, and pouring the rest slowly down his throat.

'That was just the way, father?'

'Yes, that was just the way.'

'Then go on.'

'When my father came back and found the soldier still breathing, he told me that the house was too full to take him in, but that I might have him carried to my old mammy's cabin if I chose and that mammy and I might see what we could do.'

'Early in the morning I dressed myself, and went down to my father's study, where I got a big sheet of white paper, and printed on it, in great straggling letters (I could not print so well as you do, although I was older), "Die—which I won't!"'

'As soon as my breakfast was over, I went down to mammy's cabin with the sheet in my hand, and pinned it securely on the footboard of my soldier's bedstead with two of my mother's

'I'd like one pinned on the foot of my bed like the man had.'

There was some silence for a moment, and when Mr. Barton spoke his voice was unsteady. 'Perhaps mother will make one for you. Were you listening, dear?'

Mrs. Barton came forward. There were deep circles about her eyes, and her lips, as they set in a smile, were quivering. 'Yes, I will make it,' she said; and she went into the next room.

When she came back she had a sheet of white paper in her hand. And on it, in great black letters, were the words, "Die—which I won't."

Jere looked at it contentedly. 'That's right, isn't it, father? Now pin it up for me just where he had it. Tell them where father.'

'Just at the foot of the bed—a little to the right.'

The nurse pinned up the paper, and Jere read it, slowly, "Die—which I won't!"

Mrs. Barton, with a catch in her breath and a quick movement, bent forward. Her husband stretched out his arm, and drew her to him, whispering in her ear.

'Go on,' said Jere. 'Mother, you mustn't interrupt.'

Mrs. Barton went back to the window, and the story went on.

'My mother was very good to me. She used to excuse me from my lessons, and I spent long hours sitting by my soldier's bedside. "You may learn your lesson there to-day," she would say;

but as she never gave me any book to take with me, I used to wonder what she meant. Now I understand that too. I had a kind of storehouse in my mind, where I kept things I didn't understand, and wondered over them.'

'You understand everything now, father, don't you?'

Mr. Barton looked down at the flushed face and listened to the quick breaths.

'No, not everything; there are some things which I shall never understand. I keep making additions to my storehouse.'

Jere's eyes were fastened on the paper at the foot of the bed; then on his own hand. He was curling up the small fingers, save one which pointed to the footboard.

Mr. Barton's voice went on steadily. 'At first I was sent from the room whenever the wounds were dressed, but after a little the doctor let me come in and hold things for him. Once when I was standing by the bedside, I saw my soldier's hand groping on the counterpane, and I put mine into it. After that I let mammy hold the things, while I held my soldier's hand instead. He would turn and look for it if I was not quite ready. Every morning when I came in, I would point to the paper, and the soldier's finger would point also.'

'Like mine does? See, father!'

'Yes, just that way. It was a long time before he could speak, and longer before he could move—hand or foot.'

'"All depends upon being very careful," the doctor said. He used to give me his instructions, and I watched my soldier to see that he did nothing which he was told not to do. I was very strict with him.'

'"I believe the man is actually going to get well," said the doctor at last.'

'And he did. But it was very slow. At first he was only allowed to sit up in bed for five minutes at a time. I used to hold the watch. Then he got from the bed to a chair. After that there was no keeping him in the cabin. He would walk out with a stick in one hand, and the other hand resting on my shoulder. I suppose there was no prouder boy in the county than I when I walked my soldier as far as the house, and showed him to my father and mother.'

'All well, father?'

'Yes, well and strong.'

Jere's eyes turned again to the foot of the bed. 'What did he do with his paper?'

'What are you going to do with yours?'

'I would like to do whatever he did.'

'The first day my soldier went out of that cabin door we unpinned it, and he folded it up carefully, and put it in an inside pocket. He was going to take it to Lucy, he said.'

'Who is Lucy?'

Mr. Barton looked down, his face changing suddenly. 'Lucy is his wife now,' he said, slowly. 'She was only his sweetheart then. She was waiting for him far away in the mountains. He told me all about her. She had no father or mother, and her aunt was not very good to her. My soldier was the only thing Lucy had on earth. He had promised that he would come back.'

The nurse advanced again with the medicine in her hand. Mr. Barton motioned her away. His voice went on monotonously. What he was saying he did not himself know.

Jere's head lay heavily on his shoulder, his eyelashes rising and drooping slowly. Once his eyes fastened on the paper, and his lips moved.

Mrs. Barton, standing behind her husband with clasped hands, bent forward breathlessly.

'"Die—which I won't!" murmured the childish voice, and the eyelids closed. The breath came softly and regularly through the parted lips.'

'Mr. Barton's voice faltered and broke. His supporting arms and body remained motionless, but he raised his head until his eyes met those of his wife, and the overflowing thankfulness in them answered the question in hers.'

Mrs. Barton covered her face with her hands, and the nurse, stepping forward, drew her gently away, her own eyes brimming over with tears.

'It is natural sleep,' she whispered. 'The crisis will pass.'