

THE SON OF HIS FATHER

VOL. I.

BY
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THE SON OF HIS FATHER.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN HE WAS A CHILD.

‘DON’T say anything before the boy.’

This was one of the first things he remembered. In the confused recollections of that early age, he seemed to have been always hearing it: said between his mother and his sister, afterwards between his grandparents, even by strangers one to another, always, ‘Don’t say anything before the boy.’ What it was, about which nothing was to be said, he had very little idea, and, indeed, grew up to be a man before, in the light of sudden revelations, he began to put these scattered gleams together, and see what they meant. They confused his little soul from the beginning, throwing strange lights and stranger shadows across his path, keeping around him a sort of unreality, a sense that things were not as they seemed.

His name was John in those days: certainly John—of that there was no doubt: called Johnnie, when people were kind, sometimes Jack—but John he always was. He had a faint sort of notion that it had not always been John Sandford. But this was not clear in his mind. It was all confused with the rest of the broken reminiscences which concerned the time in which everybody was so anxious that nothing should be said before the boy.

In those days his recollection was of a little common-place house—a house in a street—with two parlours, one behind the other, kitchens below, bed-rooms above, the most ordinary little house. There was a little garden behind, in which he played; and in which sometimes he was vaguely conscious of being shut out on

purpose to play, and doing so in an abortive, unwilling way which took all the pleasure out of it. Sometimes he only sat down and wondered, not even pretending to amuse himself, until a butterfly flew past and roused him, or his little spade showed itself temptingly at hand. At seven one is easily beguiled, whatever weight there may be on one's spirit. But now and then he would stop and look up at the windows, and see some one moving indoors, and wonder again what it was that the boy was not intended to know.

At this period of John's career, his father was alive—and he was fond of his father. Sometimes papa would be very late, and would go up to John's little bed, and bring him down in his night-gown only half awake, seeing the candles like stars through a mist of sleep and wonder, till he was roused to the fullest wakefulness by cakes and sweetmeats, and every kind of dainty which papa had brought. John became quite used to all the varying experiences of this mid-night incident—the reluctance to be roused up, the glory of going downstairs, the delight of the feast. He sat on his father's knee, with his little bare feet wrapped in a shawl, and his eyes shining as brightly as the candles, munching and chattering. He got quite used to it. He used to feel uncomfortable sometimes in the morning, and heard it said that something was very bad for him, and that the child's stomach, as well as his morals, would be spoiled. Johnnie knew as little about his stomach as about his morals. And he had a way of being well which greatly interfered with all these prognostications. He was a very sturdy little boy.

He had a consciousness through all these scenes of his mother's face, very pale, without any smile in it, showing serious, like the moon, among those lights. She gave him no cake or oranges, but it was she who wrapped up his feet in the shawl, and

took care of him in the morning when his little head sometimes ached. Papa was never visible in the morning. Johnnie was sometimes a little afraid of him, though he was so jolly in these mid-night visits. The boy was frightened when he was being carried downstairs, and clung very close, though he did not say anything about his fears. Papa would lurch sometimes on those occasions, like the steamboat on which John once had gone to sea. The memory of the lighted table, the father who always made a noise, laughing, talking, sometimes singing, always so fond of his little boy; but mamma dreadfully quiet, scarcely saying anything, and the lights of the candles, not at all like the candles we have now-a-days, but big, and shining like stars, never faded from his memory, even when he had grown a man.

In the day-time, it was rather dull. Susie was five years older than he, going on for twelve, and knowing everything. She got to saying, 'Go away, child,' when he asked her to come and play. As he remembered her, she never played, but was always at her needlework or something, almost worse than mamma—and there would be long conversations between those two in the winter's afternoon, while he was playing at coach and horses, made with chairs, in the other room, the back parlour, which was the place where they had their meals. Sometimes when he got tired of the obstinacy of Dobbin, who was the big mahogany arm-chair, and who would have his own way, and jibbed abominably, he would catch a glimpse through the half-opened folding-doors of those two over the fire. They always spoke very low, and sometimes cried—and, if he came a little near, would give each other a frightened look and say, 'Not a word before the boy.' Johnnie's ears got very quick to those words—he heard them when they were whispered, and sometimes he heard them through his sleep. Could they be

talking of anything naughty, or what was it so necessary that he must not know?

There came a time at last when all this confused mystery came to a climax. There were hasty comings and goings, men at the door whose heavy loud knockings filled the house with dismay, stealthy entrances in the dark: for Johnnie a succession of troubled dreams, of figures flitting into his room in the middle of night, but never papa in the old jovial way to carry him down to the parlour with its staring candles. No one thought of such indulgences now. If they were wrong, they were all over. When he awoke he saw, half awake and half dreaming, sometimes his father, though he had been told he was away, sometimes his mother; other strange visitors flitting like ghosts, all confusion and disorder, the night turned into day. He was himself kept in corners in the daylight, or sent into the garden to play, or shut up in the back parlour with his toys. It seemed to Johnnie that they must think he wanted nothing but those toys, and never could understand that to play without any companions, without any wish for playing, was impossible; but he was a dutiful child, and tried to do what he was told. It was at this strange and uncomfortable period that he learned how nice it is to have a book, after you have exhausted all your solitary inventions and played at everything you know. The fascination of the books; however, added to the confusion of everything. Johnnie mixed up Robinson Crusoe with the agitating phantasmagoria of his little life. He thought that perhaps it was from the savages his father was hiding,—for he was sure that it was his father he saw in those visions of the night, though every one said he had gone away. Then there came a lull in the agitation, and silence fell upon the house. Mamma and Susie cried a great deal, and were together more than ever, but Johnnie's dreams stopped, and he saw no more in the

night through his half-closed eyes the flitting figures and moving lights.

Then there came a strange scene very clearly painted upon his memory, though it was not for many years after that he was able to piece it in to his life. Johnnie had been left alone in the house with the maid, the only servant the family had, who was a simple-minded country woman, and kind to the child, though not perhaps in a very judicious way. She was kind in the way of giving him sweetmeats and pieces of cake, and the remains of dainty dishes which upstairs were not supposed to be wholesome for Johnnie, 'as if the dear child shouldn't have everything of the best,' Betty said. On this day Betty was full of excitement, not capable of staying still in one place, she herself told him. She gave him his dinner, which he had to eat all by himself, a singular but not on the whole a disagreeable ceremony, since Betty was about all the time, very anxious that he should eat, and amusing him with stories.

'Master Johnnie,' she said, when the meal was over, 'it do be very dull staying in the house, with nothing at all to do. Missus won't be back till late at night. I know she can't, poor dear. It would be more cheerful if you and me went out for a walk.'

'But how could you leave the house, Betty, all alone by itself?' said the little boy.

'It won't run away, never fear, nor nobody couldn't steal the tables and chairs; and there ain't nothing else left to steal, more's the pity,' said Betty. 'We'll go afore it's dark, and it'll cheer us up a bit: for I can't sit still, not me, more than if I was one of the family: though you don't know nothing about that, you poor little darlin', Lord bless you.'

Betty, it is to be feared, would have told him readily enough, but the child was so used to hearing that he must not be told that he asked no questions. To go out, however, was certainly more cheerful than to pass another wintry afternoon in the back parlour without seeing anyone but Betty. He allowed himself to be buttoned up in his little thick blue topcoat of pilot cloth, which made him as broad as he was long, and to have his comforter wound round his neck, though he did not much like that; and then they sailed forth, Betty putting in her pocket the great key of the house door. She did not talk much, being occupied profoundly with interests of her own, of which Johnnie knew nothing, but she led him along past lines of cheerful shops all shining with Christmas presents: for Christmas was coming on, and there was an unusual traffic in the toy shops and the book shops, and all the places where pleasant things for Christmas were. Johnnie stopped and gazed, dragging at her hand, and wondered if any of the picture-books would fall to his share. His mother did not buy many pleasant things for him; but if papa came back he never forgot Johnnie; he thought to himself that surely for Christmas papa would come back—unless indeed the savages had got him. But a certain big policeman strolled by, while this thought passed through the child's mind, and, even at seven years old, one cannot feel that savages are ineffectual creatures where such policemen are. But the thought of papa gave Johnnie a sense of mystery and alarm, since his father had disappeared in the day-time, only to be seen fitfully through half-shut eyes at night.

As the afternoon wore on, and the lights were lighted in all the shop windows, Johnnie thought this better than ever; but Betty was no longer disposed to let him gaze. She said it was time to go home, and then led him away through little dark and dingy streets which

he did not know, and which tired him both in his little legs and in his mind. At last they came to a row of houses which ran along one side of a street, the other side of which was occupied by a large and lofty building. Here Betty paused a moment pondering.

‘Master Johnnie,’ she said at last, ‘if you’ll be a good boy and don’t say a word to anyone, I’ll take you to see the most wonderful place you ever saw, something which you will never, never forget all your life.’

‘What is it, Betty?’ asked Johnnie.

‘Oh, you would not understand if I was to tell you its name. But it’s something that you will always remember, and be glad you went there. But you must never, never tell; for if you were to tell anyone your mamma would be angry, and it’s not known what she would do to me.’

‘I will never tell,’ said Johnnie, upon which Betty gave him a kiss and called him ‘a poor darlin’, as knew nothing,’ and knocked at the door before which they were standing, and took him up a long, long narrow stair. Johnnie saw nothing of any importance when he was taken into a little ordinary room at the top, where two women were sitting beside a little fire, where a kettle was boiling and the table set all ready for tea.

‘This is the poor little boy,’ Betty said, after a while: and both the women looked at him, and patted him on the head, and said, ‘Poor little gentleman,’ and that he must have his tea first. He did not mind having his tea, for he was tired with his walk, and the bread and butter they gave him was sprinkled thinly over with little sweetmeats, very little tiny things, red and white, which were quite new to Johnnie. He was used to jam and honey and other things of

this kind, but to eat bread and butter sprinkled with sugar-plums was quite a novelty. While he was busy in this agreeable way, one of the women put out the candles and drew up the blind from the window. And then Johnnie saw the wonderful thing which he was never to forget all his life.

Out of the little dark room there was a view into a great hall, lighted up and crammed full of people all sitting round and round in endless lines. Even in church he had never seen so many people together before. Some were seated in red dresses quite high up where everybody could see them, but the others were quite like people at church. It was very strange to see all that assembly, busy about something, sitting in rows and looking at each other, and not a word to be heard. Johnnie gazed and eat his bread and butter with the sugar-plums, and was not quite sure which was the most wonderful.

‘What are they doing?’ he asked Betty. But Betty only put her arms round him and began to sob and cry.

‘Oh, bless the child, Lord bless the child! Oh listen to him, the little innocent.’

He did not like to be held to Betty’s breast, nor to be wept over in that unpleasant way. He shook himself free, and said to the other women,

‘Will you tell me? What are they doing all staring at each other.’

‘It’s a trial, my poor dear little gentleman. They are trying a man for his life.’

‘No, no, not for his life: though it would have been for his life a little time ago,’ said the other.

Johnnie did not know what it meant to try a man for his life; but he accepted the description, as a child often does, without further inquiry, and stood and looked at it wondering. But it did not seem to him the extraordinary thing that Betty had said it was, and presently he began to pull at her skirts, and asked to go home.

That was a very dismal night for Johnnie. They got home, and his things were taken off, and he returned to his toys. To see him playing in his forlorn way, all alone, with his little serious face was too much for Betty. But he got very tired of her caresses and attempts at consolation. The night passed on, and bed-time came, but his mother never came home. He sat and listened for the steps coming along the street, and dozed and woke up again, and felt as if all the world was empty round him, and only he and Betty left. He began to cry, but he felt as if he dared not make a noise, and sat with his little head in his hands trying to keep quiet, though now and then breaking out into sobs. ‘Oh, where was mamma? Why didn’t she come? Where was Susie? What had happened that they did not come home?’ And then the picture-books in the shop windows, and the great place full of people, who sat all silent under the light in those rows and rows of seats, and the little sugar-plums upon the bread and butter, all circled confusedly in his mind. And in the end he fell asleep, and was carried up to bed by Betty, and undressed without knowing it; but yet even in his sleep seemed to know and feel that there was nobody in the house but Betty and him. Nobody but the servant and the little boy! What a strange, miserable thing in a house that it should be left alone with only the servant and the little boy.

Johnnie woke up suddenly out of his confused and broken sleep. His little bed was in the dressing-room that opened into his mother's bedroom. He woke to hear a sound of crying and miserable voices, low and interrupted with tears. There was a light in his mother's room, and he could see Susie moving about, taking off her outdoor dress, while mamma lay back in the easy-chair before the little fire, as if she had been taken ill. She lay there as if she could not move, till a sudden quick pang sprang up in the little boy's heart, and a coldness as of ice crept over him, even in the warmth of his little bed. Could mamma, too, be going to die? Mamma *too*? He did not know at all what he meant, and yet he knew that something had happened which was more miserable than anything that ever had been before. He lay still, and gazed out from between the bars of his crib, and listened to the crying. That grown-up people should cry was dreadful to him. He wanted to get up and creep to his mother's knee, and so at least belong to them, rather than be left out in this dreadful solitude: but he knew that if he did this they would immediately stop their talking, and tell each other that nothing must be said before the boy. So all that he could do was to lie still, and cry too, the silent tears dropping upon his little pillow, the sound of the low voices, too low to be intelligible, but not to betray the wretchedness that was in them, coming to him like sounds in a dream. Oh what a different scene from the other awakings, when, half peevish, half frightened out of his sleep, he had opened his eyes to the dazzling of the candle, and seen papa's laughing face bending over his; and then to be carried off, with his little bare feet in papa's hands to keep them warm, even though there might be a lurching like the steamboat, which frightened yet made him laugh. And then the cakes, the oranges, the sip of papa's wine, and, best of all, papa's laugh, and his merry face. That little vision out of the past got confused by-and-by with the crying and

the low talk in the next room, and then with the people sitting in the court, and the sugar-plums on the bread and butter, till Johnnie, in a great bewilderment of images, not knowing which was which, at last out of that chaos once more fell asleep.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN HE WAS A CHILD (CONTINUED).

It was not very long after this, but how long his memory could not clearly make out, when Johnnie was sent to the country to his grandfather and grandmother, who lived in a village some twenty miles away. He did not recollect being told about it, or at all prepared for his journey, but only that one morning the old people came in, driving in an old-fashioned little light cart, called a shandry in the neighbourhood, and took him away. They were old people who were 'retired,' living in the village in a nice little house of their own, without any particular occupation. The old lady kept poultry, and the old gentleman read the newspapers, and they were very comfortable and happy, with fresh country complexions, and kind country ways. Grandmamma wore a little brown front with little curls under her cap, which had been the fashion in her day. But her husband looked much handsomer in his own white hair. They were neither of them very like Johnnie's mother, who was tall and quiet and very serious, while the old people were full of cheerfulness and jokes. But there were no jokes on the day when they came to carry off Johnnie. They came in, and kissed their daughter with scarcely a word, and then the old gentleman sat down in a chair by the fire, with a great many curves about his eyes, and wrinkles in his forehead—which had never been seen there before—while his wife dropped down upon the sofa and began to cry, saying,

'Oh that we should have lived to see this day!' rocking herself backwards and forwards in dreadful distress.

‘Don’t cry, grandmamma,’ said Johnnie, stealing to her side, and stroking with his hands to console her the skirts of her thick silk gown. Susie went to the other side, and put her arm round the old lady, and said the same thing.

‘Don’t cry, grandmamma!’ but Susie knew all about the trouble, whatever it was. She was not like her little brother, only unhappy and perplexed to see the grown-up people cry.

‘Run away, dear, and play,’ his mother said; and the poor little boy obeyed, very forlorn and miserable to be always sent away. But he only went to the back parlour, where his box of bricks was standing on the floor, and where he began to build a house, oh, so seriously, as if it were a matter of life and death. The folding-doors were half open, and he still could see grandmamma crying and the wrinkles on grandpapa’s face, and hear the murmur of the talk, very serious, and broken now and then with a sob. They were in great trouble—that Johnnie could easily make out: and by this time he was as sure, as if some one had told him all about it, that their trouble had something to do with his father—his merry laughing father, who spoilt him so—who was never now to be seen even in the middle of the night through half shut eyes. The conversation that went on was not much. Grandpapa for his part only sat and stared before him, and occasionally shook his head, and drew his brows together, as if it was somebody’s fault; while grandmamma cried and sometimes exclaimed,

‘Oh, how could he do it? Had he no thought of you or the children, or how dreadfully you would feel it?’

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