

THE SON OF HIS FATHER

VOL. II.

BY
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THE SON OF HIS FATHER.

CHAPTER I.

OUT IN THE WORLD.

OUT in the world.

It was not so long a journey as that he had taken to Liverpool with the curate, but how different it was! Then he had his home to return to; he had set forth curious indeed and interested, with a hope of discovering something about himself, but always with the idea of going back to the quiet of his own life and working it out. He had his natural anchorage, his harbour to sail back to, and no need to think of facing by himself the storms of life. He had not been happy then; but even his sadness, his trouble, even the mystery thrown into his life, his disquietude, all these were so different. That was only a sort of amateur trouble, a playing at distress. Now it enveloped him on every side. He sat down opposite to his mother in the railway carriage, and saw everything that he had known gliding away from him, disappearing into the distance. He did not know where he was going, or to what. She said nothing to him, not a word of his home, or of his new life; and his old had come to an end, as if he had died.

As if he had died! In some ways it would have been more satisfactory to have died. Then his name and memory, the name which he knew best, without any mystery attached to it, would always have remained in the same place, and the whole village would have been sorry, and talked of him with bated breath, shaking their heads in sympathy. Poor boy, to have died so young! and Elly and the boys would have looked after his grave. Elly at least would have done it. She would never have forgotten. Tears

came into John's eyes when he thought of Elly going with her flowers to his grave, crying a little, never forgetting him. He made a little picture to himself, in which he saw her leaning over the turf, arranging her posy to his memory: and his eyes moistened with sadness which had in it an exquisite sort of melancholy pleasure. For after all it is not so dreadful for the very young to contemplate dying: the violets on their grave breathe to them a great consolation and the thought of the universal sympathy; they have not got so engrafted into life, so determined in all its habits as their elders. But when John turned to the other side, and found himself facing that blank world of the unknown—not knowing what he was to do, having, so to speak, no say in it, depending entirely upon what She should decide—there was no consolation at all in it, nothing that corresponded to the violets on the grave.

He did not know how his life was to be shaped, where he was to go, what he was to do. She had brought away a few things with her, but very few—grandmamma's work-basket, in which she had kept her knitting, and in which, had John had his will, the last unfinished piece of that knitting should have been kept for ever—a selection of the books which she had made carefully, rejecting so many that grandfather had been proud of, and which she had said were of no use: but they would have been of use to John: an old picture or two from the walls, portraits with which John had been acquainted all his life, and one little old-fashioned bureau of carved wood, which had always stood in a corner, which he had never seen opened, and to which she seemed to attach great importance. These, with some of the old lady's boxes, were all she brought away. And John had to come out of the house, leaving it as if the old people might come in from their walk at any moment. Had it been pulled to pieces first he thought it would have been

less dreadful: but probably had that been done, and all the old furniture scattered, he would have thought it worse still. Everything had the aspect of being the worst that could happen in his present state of mind. Mr. Cattley came to the station to say good-bye. He was very civil to Mrs. Sandford, but he grasped John's hand without a word.

'You'll write,' he said, just as the train glided away. And the porters touched their hats and said 'Good-bye, Mr. John,' with a kind recollection of sixpences past. And so the boy disappeared from Edgeley, and his early life ended as if he had died, only that the severance was still more complete.

There was very little said until they drew near the great smoke which was London, and which roused a little excitement in John's fatigued bosom, as it began to stain the sky so long before they arrived. It was almost night when they reached the great bustling crowded station—dusk at least, the lamps beginning to twinkle, the air growing cold which had been almost warm in spring brightness in the earlier part of the day. Mrs. Sandford had all her packages collected and placed on a cab, with little assistance from John, who was bewildered and confused by all the commotion and tumult, people running against him on all sides, and shrieking at each other. She was perfectly collected, business-like, and calm, understanding exactly what to do, and evidently accustomed to manage everything for herself; and the officials about seemed to recognise her, and were particularly ready and assiduous in her service. She made John get into the cab before her, like a child, and told the cabman where to drive; and it was only when they began this last brief part of their journey that she gave him any information as to where he was going.

‘It is time I should tell you,’ she said, ‘that I cannot have you to live with me, John. I should perhaps have said this before. I don’t know whether you are aware what my occupation is, though of course you have always addressed your letters to me at the hospital.’

John looked with quickened interest at the close black bonnet and cloak, perceiving their difference from other people’s bonnets and cloaks as if for the first time. It was not for the first time. He had remarked it at once and always, feeling the difference. But then, in her, everything was different.

‘I know,’ he said, ‘the letters were always addressed to the hospital.’

‘That is my profession,’ she said; ‘I am the matron. I had to take to that when I was left alone. I had two children to provide for, and myself worse than penniless. I don’t say this to claim your pity. I have always been quite able for my work, and it suited me. An idle woman I never could have been——’

There was nothing left for him to say. He might, perhaps, have shown a little feeling—for he had never heard anything about working women, and recognised it as the natural state of affairs that they should stay at home; but she quenched any sentimentality of that sort at once.

‘And then my father and mother took you off my hands,’ she said, with the same composure, ‘so that I was perfectly free. For, of course, Susie could go with me anywhere. I have been in the hospital for nine years. My rooms are very comfortable—for Susie and me: but I could not take you there. I have got lodgings for you close by.’

‘Oh,’ said John. He thought it was a relief to hear this, but then fell back upon himself bitterly, feeling that it was a new wrong and misery. No home, not even the semblance of a shelter, no place that belonged to him. It struck him with a sense of misery and shame.

‘It is too late to take you with me, even for tea—the hours and rules are naturally very strict; but I have ordered everything for you. You will find it quite comfortable. You will have enough to do unpacking and settling yourself to-night, and to-morrow at ten you may come to the hospital. If Susie had been able, she would have come to assist us, but this is one of the busy days. She must have had a great deal to do.’

‘Is Susan—working in the hospital, too?’

‘She helps me. She is very good, very serviceable—being a girl, she fits into everything, and spares me a great deal of trouble.’

‘And I suppose I fit into nothing,’ said John.

‘It is a pity you should take it up in that way; but it is true enough. A woman and her daughter can go anywhere. They are sure to be able to help each other. But a boy is quite different, as you say.’

Nothing further was said for a time, and John swallowed as best he could the bitterness that filled his mind. It was like a flood which rose and drowned every other sensation. Was he then of no use, a mere encumbrance, he whom everybody had looked upon as a boy who was going to do great things? The contrast of all that had been, with all that now was, became more and more bitter. He broke silence again after two or three clearings of his throat.

‘I hope, though I am so useless to you, and only a burden, that I may get something to do at least. I—must do something. I cannot be unpacking and settling myself all my life.’

‘Don’t be afraid,’ said his mother. ‘I encourage idleness in no one. Here we are at your lodgings. You had better get down your boxes yourself, with the aid of the cabman. There is only a maid-of-all-work in the house.’

John stumbled out of the carriage in haste and bitterness of soul. The cab had stopped at the door of an old-fashioned red brick house, looking small but pleasant enough, with a very white doorstep, and a woman standing in the doorway who smiled and nodded her much-adorned cap at him by way of welcome. He snatched his boxes from the cabman’s hands and carried them in himself almost with violence, which was a little safety-valve to him, and worked off the passionate perturbation of his spirit. Mrs. Sandford got out too, and walked into the little front parlour, which opened on one side of the door. On the opposite side of the street there was a great sombre building, with rows of lighted windows rising high over the level of this little row of houses, and the only prospect visible from them. Mrs. Sandford cast the quick look of a person in authority round the room.

‘You had better take down those curtains,’ she said. ‘He will be better without them; they are mere traps for dust, and keep out the fresh air. I hope you have arranged everything else as I told you.’

‘I’ve made everything as nice as I could,’ said the smiling woman; ‘and I hope as the young gentleman will be ’appy with me.’

‘I hope I may have reason to be satisfied with your treatment of him. You know, Mrs. Williams, I have something in my power.’

‘Oh, la, yes, mum! I knows that,’ said the woman, in a tone of alarm; and then she made John a curtsey, picking up her smile again with an air of having put it into a corner for a moment, which would have amused him had he been able to be touched by such light thoughts. He had in the meantime thrust the boxes which contained his own property into the little bed-room beyond, which opened with folding doors from the parlour, and it was the glimpse this afforded which had prompted the remark about the curtains, grim articles of hard red woollen stuff, which half covered the windows of the inner room.

Mrs. Sandford gave another glance around her. The table in the centre of the room was partially covered with a cloth, and laid apparently for that meal which is called a heavy tea. There was a plate of ham, a quantity of watercress, a pat of butter, and a little loaf, and by the side of all this a battered old tea-tray with the japanning half worn off, on which were the tea things, the big cup and saucer and jug of blue milk, familiar to the dwellers in London lodgings. Mrs. Sandford cast a glance at all this with apparent satisfaction.

‘It is not what you have been used to,’ she said; ‘but it is not bad for the kind of thing. I hope you will be able to make yourself comfortable here. Susie will come and see you if she can to-night, and to-morrow at ten I shall expect you at the hospital. I must go now. Good-night.’

She paused a moment, turned back, laid her hand on his shoulder, and kissed him lightly on the forehead. It was the first

time she had done so, and John had a feeling that it was because of the presence of the spectator, who might have made remarks upon the cold parting of the mother and son—this thought gave him a feeling of horror and repulsion not to be described. He grew red, as with a sense of insult. She had come to the place where she was known, and kissed him to keep up appearances. The youth could have struck her as he drew his cheek away.

Perhaps she too felt that what she had done was not natural. She withdrew too with something like an angry colour rising over her features. Motives are so mixed, and human sentiments so complex. Perhaps it was because of the presence of that spectator that she had kissed her son; and yet there were many other feelings in her mind; quiverings of long-suppressed emotion, and an impulse in which there were many tender elements. But she saw what he thought, and there was enough truth in it to make it a new sting to her that he should have thought so. She went away back to her cab without another word, and he stood and watched while it crossed the street and drew up at a door a short distance off, a side door in the great building with its many lights. There he stood gazing while the cabman delivered his load of packages. He ought to have helped, perhaps; to have gone with her and seen her safely landed. But he stood instead at a distance, looking on with unfriendly eyes, with his mother's kiss still burning and stinging. How strange that it should be so! He stayed there till she had disappeared with all her goods, and the cab had driven away; then returned to the little parlour of his lodgings alone.

It was a great wonder to him to find himself there, and to think that he was in London, in the heart of the great place to which every man's eyes are turned, where everything is to be done, where all that is pleasant and gay, and all that is noisy and terrible, are

going on. He had perhaps thought, even in his subdued state, even under the chilling shadow of his mother's wing, something of this kind. However subdued one may be, however little desire one may have for amusement or commotion, yet in London it is inevitable that one should be amused and excited. It comes, in spite of one's self, in the mere clamour of so much life, in the bustle of the streets, in the noise and riot. So he had thought, as so many think every day. But what had really happened to John in London was that he had fallen into the completest stillness, a quiet more than the quiet of the village, a loneliness such as he had never known before. His landlady had lighted two candles on the table. She had drawn down the blind, shutting out a bit of daffodil sky, the last lingering of day in the midst of the coming night. All was shut up, above, without—and John was alone.

What a form for novelty to take, for the first night of London, for the excitement of a new life! He sank down upon the hard horse-hair sofa, and looked round with speechless dismay. Here he was shut up as in a box, closed in, as if he were in a prison. In a prison it would almost be more cheerful; you would be aware, at least, of a host of other minds, of other hearts beating. Here there was nothing. A little parlour, with a little bed-room behind; a landlady, with nodding ribbons in her cap; a door which shuts out the world. It was like waking up after a night of fiery dreams, and finding yourself shut in a closet, separated from everything—the blind drawn, the door closed, the room shut up, and the young victim all alone.

CHAPTER II.

LONDON.

HE had eaten, for he was hungry, and ham and bread and butter are not to be despised when nothing better is to be had. Even, which was curious to his state of mind, he had eaten largely, putting up before him the railway book which he had not read on his journey, and going on unconsciously with his vigorous, youthful appetite. This, the first act of his solitude, was by no means so disagreeable as he had feared. It increased his personal comfort, for he had eaten scarcely anything all day, and the increase of personal comfort ameliorates everything. When he had finished, he carried one of his candles to a small table near the window, and sat down there and read on, finishing his book, which had interested him. When he had closed it, and laid it on the table, the realisation of all the circumstances, which returned to his mind, was not so heavy as the first time. His heart began to spring up again, after being crushed under the foot of fate. It began to throb and tingle with the thought that he was in London, on the border of everything that was most living and desirable. The little fumes of interest of his story increased the effect by soothing away his personal misery. And now, as he sat in the small, silent room, something came to him which he had been conscious of all along, without knowing what it was, a sound continuous, like the far-off sound of the sea or of the wind, but subdued, as though the storm was far off, a sound which, now that he was free from those claims made by his lowered bodily condition upon his mind, became more and more apparent, filling the air with an uninterrupted murmur. What was it?

He sat up and listened, and then, with an excitement which made his heart jump, he recognised what it was. It was London! Had he not read in many a book of that great, low volume of sound, which some people described as the sound of many waters, and some as the distant roar of a tempest. It was soft here in his little hermitage, amid the strange solitude and silence, but rolled and murmured continuous, never ending. He perceived now that he had noticed it from the first moment, that all along he had wondered when it would stop, vaguely disquieted by it without knowing what it was; and now he knew that it would never stop, that it was the breath of the great multitude, the hum of their endless going on and on. John sat and listened to it till it went to his head, exciting him like wine. He could not rest. The contrast of this little prison-chamber in which he sat, and all that was implied in that low, continuous roar and hum of men, stirred his imagination more and more. He got up and opened the window, and looked out. Opposite to him was the great mass of building dark against the sky, which seemed to oppress and stifle the neighbourhood, taking away the air; but outside of that, away across the river where the world was, the hum, the roar, the continuous roll of sound came stronger and stronger. It called upon the young soul which stood and throbbed and listened. He had the habits of his youth and innocence strong upon him—a sort of unspoken sense of duty that restrained him and kept him from following his own impulses. It was not till some time had elapsed that he began to think it possible to obey that call—to go out and see what it was which gave forth that mighty voice. When the thought entered his mind it filled all his veins with excitement. Should he go? Why should he not go? No word had been said to him to bind him to remain where he was. It was not to waste day and night shut up in a dreary little room that he had come to London. He looked round upon the blank, grey walls, and

found their bondage intolerable. It was like a box in which he was shut up. His brain and his veins seemed to be swelling, bursting with life that must have an outlet somehow. No, certainly, he could not stay there. He must have air and room to breathe; he must see for himself what was meant by London. But John, even in his excitement, was prudent. He put away his watch—which was not the one Mrs. Egerton had given him, but the old, dear silver one, the one that had no value at all and yet so great a value. He was aware that in London the natural thing was to rob a countryman, to take his watch from him. He would not expose his treasure to such a risk; but when he had laid that away he felt, with confidence, that there was nothing else to lose. They might hustle or knock him down, if they could, but there was nothing else they could do to him. Nevertheless, it was with something of that warlike exhilaration, with which a struggle is foreseen at his age, that John buttoned his coat and took his hat. He felt that ‘they’ (though he had not the least notion who *they* might be) would not have an easy bargain of him.

He went out without even being remarked. No ‘Where are you going?’ ‘When will you come back?’ to impede his liberty. That fact also went to his heart a little. He had felt his loneliness very forlorn—now he felt it exciting, exhilarating. He set his hat firmly on his head, and drew a long breath when he felt the fresh air of the night, so different from that of any parlour, encircle him with its coolness and vastness. That, too, has an intoxication in it which everything that is young acknowledges. The air may be sober in the morning—it is like wine at night. The darkness has a mystery, a magic in it—the lights twinkling through it—the world made into something ideal, in which miracles are. John stood still for a moment at the door, realising that he was there, that he was

unshackled—his own master—and then, drawn by the great voice that called and called him, he turned his face towards the distant blazing of the lights, and set out—to discover that new world.

To discover London! how many do it every day, with hearts beating high, with hopes immeasurable, which so often collapse and come to nothing; but this is not the time for moralising. John set out. His way began in the darkness of this little street, with its little houses, faced by the great sombre shadow of the hospital, which shut out the air from it and the sky. He plunged into the darkness at first, making his way between rows of insignificant buildings, with a feeble shop here and there flashing its faint illumination, and then, with a great sweep of fresh air seizing him, came out upon the bridge. The sky was full of the clearness of spring, though there was no moon. The river flowed dark and silent below, faintly visible further up the stream in pale streaks of reflection, across which would rise a dark and ghostly shadow of something floating, a barge, a heavy blackness in the middle of the faint light; but lamps blazing overhead, the glare of gas, and here and there the chill contradictory artificial moon of the electric light ‘swearing’ horribly, as the French say, with all the yellow lamps around. The murmur of sound grew and grew as the boy went on; it was a rhythmic roar as of waves beating against a shore, or the rush of a prodigious waterfall, a great moral Niagara, bigger than any physical falls, however gigantic. It was made up of the sounds of carriages of every description, of voices, the hum of the crowd constantly broken by some shrill interruption of a cry or shout, which gave emphasis to the general continual, unfailing current of sound. He hurried along, quickening his pace, led by it as if it had been a siren’s song.

On the other side of the river a noble mass of walls and towers rose against the night. He guessed what it was, and his heart beat high. Then suddenly he was over the bridge, he was in it, in the very crowd itself, among the thunder of the carriages, the perpetual movement of the passengers, the very heart of London—he thought even, in awe, holding his breath—of the world. Was that Parliament? He got as near as he could and watched the carriages, the heads appearing at the windows, men in whose hands was the fate of the world. John felt as if he had some hand in it all as he watched them dashing up to the doorway, sometimes cheered, with a running fire of remark volleying about from the voices of the crowd. It was all so unusual, that he could scarcely make out at first what the people about him said; and, when he understood the words, he did not understand the allusions, not knowing who the members were or anything but that they were members, and therefore surrounded with a halo of wonder and interest. Presently one of the men standing near began to perceive his ignorance and curiosity, and to offer explanations. But John was not so simple as that, he said to himself. He knew that the danger of London was to listen to people who expressed themselves benevolently towards you, and wanted to give you information. He withdrew accordingly from that spot, and by-and-by, feeling that there were still other worlds beyond, left this scene of overwhelming interest altogether, promising himself that he would look up all the prints in the shop windows, and so learn to identify the members of parliament himself.

The dark shadow to his right hand was that of the Abbey. He held his breath with awe, but he was in no mood for the silence and darkness. He followed the roar and crush of the crowd through a dark, broad, vacant street or two until he emerged into another kind

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