

Michael's Son

BY HARRY JAMES SMITH

A MARCH night, and outside the rain was falling in splashes. Every now and then I noticed the sound of its incessant dribble from the eaves upon the tin roof just below the windows of the special-visitors' room. Then it would gradually grow remote and drift out of my consciousness, and once more I would become aware of where I was and what had brought me hither.

I was living a whole lifetime just then inside the space of three hours. They had telegraphed me to be on hand, for things were likely to take a bad turn almost any moment. I had come through on the Lake Shore Limited from Cleveland, and gone directly to St. Gregory's. I remember how still everything seemed that night as I came up out of the Subway at the Cathedral Parkway station and turned into the long, wet cross-street, with its rows of lights reflected in yellow bars on the pavement.

"You can wait here," the interne had directed, as he slid back the door of the visitors' room. "I don't think we'll be able to give you any definite report before three o'clock or so; but you'd better be ready to come up any minute."

That was all I could get him to say, except that the case was difficult.

I went into the room and sat down automatically on a mission settle that stood against the opposite wall. The door closed, and I was there alone. At least I supposed so until I looked about me. Then I noticed that there was some one in the opposite corner—an old man, a little over sixty, I should judge, with matty white hair and a keen, close-shaved face full of small wrinkles. He had not moved nor given any indication of his presence when I entered; but his eyes were fixed on me with a curious impersonal intentness like the gaze of a sculptured Buddha.

His two hands rested on the crook of a heavy cane, and his shoulders and head

were bent forward until his chin almost touched the gnarled and skinny fingers. I noticed that his head trembled a little all the time, like a hanging leaf on a still winter day. One would have found something grotesque in his appearance if it had not been pathetic in the same degree. He was sitting in an armchair, and he continued sitting there in this attitude without moving, without any sign of recognition in his fixed, cavernous eyes, which blinked every few seconds like an owl's in strong light.

It would have been hard to say whether the silence with which we regarded each other meant that we had nothing in common or that we had everything in common; but I suspect that it was the latter, and I think we were afraid of each other, just because each of us knew that the other was trying to wrench the future out of the inscrutable control of fate.

At all events, an hour must have passed before either of us spoke. Meantime, I heard the wash from the eaves dribbling on the roof outside, and now and then I would get out of my seat and stare through the window up the long, wet street, with its reflected bars of light. I thought about the things that any man has to think about at such a time, and about the one thing that most men keep out of sight as long as they can. There was much of a strangely irrelevant character amongst the flood of ideas that raced across my brain. I did not direct my thoughts: they were breaking up into my consciousness after some arbitrary and undecipherable method of their own, and I myself seemed to be a purely external observer of the process.

I recalled, oddly enough, a certain game of two-old-cat that I had played one July day years ago in the open lot behind the Second Advent church at home. Nothing had occurred then to make it more memorable than a hundred other games of two-old-cat, long since gone into oblivion;

but it all came back now, point by point, with the picturelike vividness of a panorama. I could see myself crouching there in a carefully imitated professional attitude behind the round stone that served for home-plate, and I remembered how I had spit into my new twenty-five-cent catcher's mitt, and then rubbed it with dirt to get a good grip. . . .

Suddenly there were steps in the hallway outside. They were coming nearer. I saw the emaciated hands of the old man tighten on the head of his cane until the blue veins bulged. Our eyes met again with a shock that was almost physical. But the steps retreated in the distance, and the room was quiet once more, only I heard his breath coming heavily, and the rain had begun to slap against the window.

A moment later he spoke. He did not seem to be addressing me, though his eyes still rested on my face.

"God!" he said.

I never heard a single word tell so much. It was as if all the secrets of the past had just then broken their immemorial silence. His voice was hoarse, and had a sort of crackle in it like the breaking of dried reed-grass under one's feet.

I got up from the settle and went to the window again, across which the rain was now running in little scallops. The lights outside were almost invisible now—mere blotches, with vague halos.

"I wish I could do something for you," I said, mechanically. I had to say something, and it was as easy to say that as anything else. If I hadn't spoken I should have gone crazy in a little while. The act of utterance brought me the feeling of knocking over walls—large, blank, white walls which had begun to crowd in on me.

The man blinked his eyes, and his lips parted with a kind of chuckle in which there was not the least suggestion of mirth.

"You're very obligin', sir," he said, "but it ain't no real use sayin' them kind o' things now. We don't neither of us care about anybody else—not just now. It wouldn't be natur'."

Somewhere in the distance we heard a faint scream, intense and shrill with agony, which came to such a sudden end

that you almost felt a door being shut noiselessly upon it.

"That ain't mine," remarked the old man, with an accent of timid defiance. "I know that ain't mine. He wouldn't never make no noise even if they kilt him."

"Your son?" I asked, indifferently.

"That's the size of it, sir," he answered, pushing out the point of his cane along a crack in the floor. "Me boy Jim."

"Appendicitis?"

He nodded his head. "The boy ain't never been sick in his life before. No, sir, there ain't a speck or a scar on his whole body. When he was a kid I used ter wash him meself every day, his ma havin' died when he was three, an' after that nobody but me ever touched him."

"How old is he?" I asked. On the whole, to talk was easier for both of us than to keep silence. It seemed to drive back the black things that flapped in one's eyes.

"Twenty-five come Thursday week, sir, an' ye never seen a likelier lad. Just beginnin' to grow a neat little mustache, an' his eyes is blue, like his ma's. He always favored his ma."

"You live together?"

"Sure we do. Always have, savin' the year he was to Cuba an' two years he was to a normal school. He thinks a awful pile o' eddication. I ain't never had none meself; but I done a good job on him, if I do say it. Why, he's had nine year o' schoolin', an' never 'ad to turn his hand to get it, neither. Hully Mike! but you ought to see all the prizes an' badges, and them other fool things he's took to school. I got a whole wall to home covered with 'em. Oh, he's goin' to get well all right."

"I hope he is," I agreed, and then we sat in silence for a time.

I began thinking of the summer when I had first met Charlotte—that glorious golden summer on Buzzard Bay, when all the past and the future seemed to stand still and wait for us while we wandered together along the shore—the intense blue sky overhead flecked by the rapid wing of an occasional sea-gull.

We had read the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—that inimitable handbook for lovers—sitting in the tall grass of an



Drawn by Harry Mathes

Half-tone plate engraved by L. C. Faber

HE CONTINUED SITTING THERE WITHOUT MOVING

open field above the bay, and I saw her again now, leaning on one elbow and making funny little braids out of the long timothy-stalks, while I read the lines that no one has a right to read, I think, unless he is in love himself—in love with his heart and his soul and whatever else of him there is:

"How do I love thee, let me count the ways—

I love thee to the depth and breadth
and height

My soul can reach." . . .

A small bird had flown up from the ground a few yards away, and we had gone off on a hunt for the nest—hunting for nests and eggs in August! . . .

That was three years ago: and it had all proved true—ten times truer than a man has a right to ask for. . . .

"You say you hope he is,"—it was the voice of the old man that recalled me after I don't know how long an interval—perhaps a minute, perhaps twenty. "You say you hope he is! There ain't no hopin' about it. He's got to get well. . . . He's goin' to."

"Why, yes, of course he is," I answered, almost automatically. "Why shouldn't he?"

"That's it, sir,"—his voice was almost declamatory in its insistence, and he tattooed on the floor with his cane. "Why shouldn't he? Ain't I needin' of him? Don't he belong to me? I've been workin' at a drill-lathe over to Brooklyn for forty year, an' what would I do it for if it wasn't him? He's had all the money he needed, and more too, so he could go to the oppry an' dress refined. He's got elegant taste, Jim has. Some of 'em blames him for it; but he's a good little boy, an' he thinks his old dad's all right."

Jim's dad nodded his head two or three times for emphasis, and a little smile of fatherly pride ran across his lips.

From the darkness outside the screech of a siren-whistle broke the silence—some fire-tug, probably, on the alarm.

The man's hands clutched his cane, and he started from his seat. "God! What's that?" he cried, hoarsely. Then he sank back into the chair and laid his cane across his knees. He was ap-

parently ashamed of his nervousness and felt the need of apology. "Lord! I guess I thought it was somebody screamin' again," he explained, awkwardly. "I must be sort o' silly."

"Have you been here long?" I asked.

"Ever since ten o'clock this mornin'—I mean, yisterday mornin', for this is to-morrow now, ain't it?" he said, with an effort at accuracy. "They sint for me by the telephone, and me boss said, hand-in' me a five-dollar bill: 'Go on, Michael,' says he,—'an' God bless ye!' an' he looked at me kind o' funnylike. He's a damn fine boss, he is, if I do say it, an' he always tellin' me I was sp'ilin' the boy."

Another silence followed, during which his thoughts went their uncharted way, and mine went theirs. Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed. The drip of the rain outside had a rhythmical regularity about it now, first a long tap, and then two short ones a little farther off. It led my thoughts somehow to the plans I had made for welcoming Charlotte home from her month in the South and the surprise I had arranged for—a baby-grand piano I had bought last week. She might have been playing it, perhaps, at this very minute. . . .

The old man spoke again. "Look-a-here, sir," he said, apologetically. "I never asked ye what ye was waitin' for, did I? Who is it o' yourn?"

"My wife," I answered.

"'Pendicitis?"

"Yes, . . . it came on very suddenly while she was travelling."

"Is she as much of a youngster as you be?" he asked.

"Just twenty-four."

"Any . . . children?"

"No. . . ."

"You ain't been married long?"

"Two years."

He gave an encouraging nod. "Oh, well, well, you've a plenty o' time ahead of ye yet," he observed, paternally. "I been beginnin' to tell my boy as he ought to get married, but he wouldn't never only kind o' laugh an' say, 'What 'ud I want a wife for, dad?' There's a heap o' girls that's broke their hearts on him, but he never give a damn."

"Perhaps it will come one of these days," I said, aimlessly.

"Oh yes, it 'll come, an' don't you

worry about that. They all gets it one day or another."

"I suppose you'll be glad when the time comes."

"Well, I ain't sayin' as I won't, sir. It 'll make a nice little home for me, won't it? when I ain't good enough to work no longer. They told me at the shop last year they'd let me go whenever I said the word an' give me a annuity, too; but I says, 'No, sir; I'll stick to the job as long as it 'll stick to me,'—so there I be still."

Just then we heard the sound of feet in the hallway again. I felt my fingers clutching the edge of the settle, and my head began to prickle at the roots of my hair.

An instant later the door slid back and a nurse in white cap and apron stepped in. She went directly to the old man. "Mr. Flynn," she said, quietly, "I have very bad news for you. Your son died five minutes ago. It happened very suddenly. I will come back for you in a little while and take you up to the room if you care to go."

I can read each one of those words out of my memory to-day more clearly than from a book. She turned away and hurried out of the room, with her handkerchief to her eyes, and we were left there alone again, the man who had been a father, and I.

He had crumpled over into his chair like some ungainly roadside plant run down by a wagon-wheel. His cane had slipped to the floor, and his shoulders toppled forward until his elbows rested in his lap and his gnarled hands spread out on his knees. The fingers worked aimlessly, and his face seemed for a moment to have lost all expression, vacant and meaningless.

The sweat had broken out all over my forehead, and I got up mechanically and went to the window. The rain had stopped outside. I looked up the street, and saw it reaching on under the white spots of light for thousands of miles into a land of which I had never heard. It seemed to me as if my brain were in a vise.

Suddenly I felt a touch on my arm. I saw the man who had lived through the last two hours with me standing at my side. I was surprised to notice how

small and shrunken he was. He had not given me that impression as he sat in the chair. At the instant his eyes had something of the mute appeal in them of a dog's.

"He's dead, sir," he said,—“my Jim.”

Instinctively I gripped his hand with both of mine and held it for a long time. I could not have spoken even if he had wanted me to; but there was no need for speech just then. I remember noticing that his eyes were perfectly dry, though the lids blinked irregularly.

"I oughtn't never to o' had a boy," he said finally. "Then they couldn't have took him away. Don't you never have none, even if you think it would be nice."

"Can't I do anything for you?" I asked, automatically. I thought I heard steps again in the distance, and my ears began to sing giddily.

My question seemed to recall him to himself. "No, thank ye, sir," he answered, in the matter-of-fact tone of one long schooled to conceal his feelings. "I suppose I'll be goin' back to work in three or four days now. I can probably hold down my job for five or ten years more—I suppose it don't matter much what I does now—it's all about the same in the end."

The door opened and the nurse came in again. She stepped up to me and put her hand kindly on my elbow. "The head surgeon asked me to tell you that the critical time has passed, and that your wife is doing very well. If you will call to-morrow at three-thirty, you may have a chance to see her for a minute."

Then she turned to Jim's father. "Shall we go up now?" she said, gently.

It seemed to me as if something had snapped in my head just then and I sank back into a chair. There was nothing quite real in what I saw about me—I was amid the painted details of a picture. I saw the old man looking at me intently while the nurse went to pick up his cane. He evidently wanted to speak to me again, but felt shy in the presence of the woman. Probably she noticed this, for she stepped out and waited for him in the hall. Then he came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"You didn't need her like I needed my boy," he said, in the same matter-of-fact tone, "because a man can't never have a boy over again; but I suppose that's how they'd fix things up, and it got to turn out that way."

He started forward, then hesitated once more and came back. "But I ain't blamin' you, sir," he added, with a final

effort to make himself understood; "and even if I does wish it could o' been the other way, that's only because I can't help it, bein' as I was his dad, ye see."

A moment later I saw him limping out of the door, and I sat there alone until the first gray blur of the morning began to mix with the yellow of the gas-jets.

The Heart of a Maid

BY LAURENCE HOUSMAN

O^H, must not love to life belong,
If truth be there without disguise?
Under my window came his song
Who had the morning in his eyes.

And in his eyes I there beheld
The years we two must range apart:
And in his eyes my spirit spelled
The sure return of heart to heart.

"Now up and down the world go tread,
"But nothing in the world destroy:
"Then come you back alive or dead,
"And I shall look on you with joy!"

He turned away toward the east
With all the morning in his eyes:
And while around him light increased,
He melted out against the skies.

And goes he up the world or down,
I often think, but never know;
Though sure, from here to any town,
Was but a little way to go!

And though I never see those eyes
Till down I lie where sleep is done,
Yet every morning as I rise
I look again and find the sun.

Oh, must not love to life belong,
When truth is there without disguise?
About my window comes his song,
Who had the morning in his eyes.