

The Parting of the Ways

“**O** God, take ker o’ Dick! He’ll sure have a tough time when I’m gone—an’ I’m er goin’—mighty fast I reckon. I know I ain’t done much ter brag on—Lord—but I ain’t had nary show. I allus ‘low’d ter do ye better—but hit’s jes’ kept me scratchin’—ter do fer me an’ Dick—an’ somehow I ain’t had time—ter sarve—ye like I ought. An’ my man he’s most ways—no ‘count an’ triflin’—Lord—’cepten when he likers up—an’ then—you know how he uses me an’ Dick. But Dick, he ain’t no ways ter blame—fer what his dad an’ mammy is—an’ I ax ye—fair—O Lord—take ker o’ him—fer—Jesus’ sake—Amen.”

“Dick!—O Dick—whar are ye honey?”

A hollow-cheeked wisp of a boy arose from the dark corner where he had been crouching like a frightened animal and with cautious steps drew near the bed. Timidly he touched the wasted hand that lay upon the dirty coverlid.

“What ye want, maw?”

The woman hushed her moaning and turned her face, upon which the shadow was already fallen, toward the boy. “I’m er goin’—mighty fast—Dicky,” she said in a voice that was scarcely audible. “Whar’s yer paw?”

Bending closer to the face upon the pillow, the lad pointed with trembling finger toward the other end of the cabin and whispered, while his eyes grew big with

fear, "Sh—, he's full ergin. Bin down ter th' stillhouse all evenin'. Don't stir him, maw, er we'll git licked some more. Tell me what ye want."

But his only answer was that broken prayer as the sufferer turned to the wall again. "O Lord, take ker o'—"

A stick of wood in the fire-place burned in two and fell with a soft thud on the ashes; a lean hound crept stealthily to the boy's side and thrust a cold muzzle against his ragged jacket; in the cupboard a mouse rustled over the rude dishes and among the scanty handful of provisions.

Then, cursing foully in his sleep, the drunkard stirred uneasily and the dog slunk beneath the bed, while the boy stood shaking with fear until all was still again. Reaching out, he touched once more that clammy hand upon the dirty coverlid. No movement answered to his touch. Reaching farther, he cautiously laid his fingers upon the ashy-colored temple, awkwardly brushing back a thin lock of the tangled hair. The face, like the hand, was cold. With a look of awe and horror in his eyes, the child caught his mother by the shoulder and shook the lifeless form while he tried again and again to make her hear his whispered words.

"Maw! Maw! Wake up; hit'll be day purty soon an' we can go and git some greens; an' I'll take the gig an' kill some fish fer you; the's a big channel cat in the hole jes' above the riffles; I seed 'im ter day when I crost in the john boat. Say Maw, I done set a dead fall yester'd', d' reckon I'll ketch anythin'? Wish't it 'ud be a coon, don't you? Maw! O Maw, the meal's most gone. I only made a little pone las' night; thar's some left fer you. Shan't I fix ye some 'fore dad wakes up?"

But there was no answer to his pleading, and ceasing his efforts, the lad sank on his knees by the rude bed, not daring even to give open expression to his grief lest he arouse the drunken sleeper by the fireplace. For a long

time he knelt there, clasping the cold hand of his lifeless mother, until the lean hound crept again to his side, and thrusting that cold muzzle against his cheek, licked the salt tears that fell so hot.

At last, just as the first flush of day stained the eastern sky, and the light tipped the old pine tree on the hill with glory, the boy rose to his feet. Placing his hand on the head of his only comforter, he whispered, "Come on, Smoke, we've gotter go now." And together boy and dog crept softly across the room and stole out of the cabin door—out of the cabin door, into the beautiful light of the new day. And the drunken brute still slept on the floor by the open fire-place, but the fire was dead upon the hearth.

"He can't hurt maw any more, Smoke," said the lad, when the two were at a safe distance. "No, he sure can't lick her agin, an' me an' you kin rustle fer ourselves, I reckon."

Sixteen years later, in the early gray of another morning, a young man crawled from beneath a stack of straw on the outskirts of Boyd City, a busy, bustling mining town of some fifteen thousand people, in one of the middle western states, many miles from the rude cabin that stood beneath the hill.

The night before, he had approached the town from the east along the road that leads past Mount Olive, and hungry, cold and weary, had sought shelter of the friendly stack, much preferring a bed of straw and the companionship of cattle to any lodging place he might find in the city, less clean and among a ruder company.

It was early March and the smoke from a near by block of smelters was lost in a chilling mist, while a raw wind made the young man shiver as he stood picking the bits of straw from his clothing. When he had brushed his garments as best he could and had stretched his numb

and stiffened limbs, he looked long and thoughtfully at the city lying half hidden in its shroud of gray.

"I wonder"—he began, talking to himself and thinking grimly of the fifteen cents in his right-hand pants pocket—"I wonder if—"

"Mornin' pard," said a voice at his elbow. "Ruther late when ye got in las' night, warn't it?"

The young man jumped, and turning, faced a genuine specimen of the genus hobo. "Did you sleep in this straw-stack last night?" he ejaculated, after carefully taking the ragged fellow's measure with a practiced eye.

"Sure; this here's the hotel whar I put up—slept in the room jes' acrost the hall from your'n," he said, as he asked with a hungry look, "Whar ye goin' to eat?"

"Don't know. Did you have any supper last night?"

"Nope, supper was done et when I got in."

"Same here."

"I didn't have nothin' fer dinner neither," continued the tramp, "an' I'm er gettin' powerful weak."

The other thought of his fifteen cents. "Where are you going?" he said shortly.

The ragged one jerked his thumb toward the city. "Hear'd as how thar's a right smart o' work yonder an' I'm on the hunt fer a job."

"What do you do?"

"Tendin' mason's my strong-holt. I've done most ever'thing though; used ter work on a farm, and puttered round a saw-mill some in the Arkansaw pineries. Aim ter strike a job at somethin' and go back thar where I know folks. Nobody won't give a feller nuthin' in this yer God-fer-saken country; hain't asked me ter set down fer a month. Back home they're allus glad ter have a man eat with 'em. I'll sure be all right thar."

The fellow's voice dropped to the pitiful, pleading, insinuating whine of the professional tramp.

The young man stood looking at him. Good-for-nothing was written in every line of the shiftless, shambling figure, and pictured in every rag of the fluttering raiment, and yet—the fellow really was hungry—and again came the thought of that fifteen cents. The young man was hungry himself; had been hungry many a time in the past, and downright, gnawing, helpless hunger is a great leveler of mankind; in fact, it is just about the only real bond of fellowship between men. “Come on,” he said at last, “I’ve got fifteen cents; I reckon we can find something to eat.” And the two set out toward the city together.

Passing a deserted mining shaft and crossing the railroad, they entered the southern portion of the town, and continued west until they reached the main street, where they stopped at a little grocery store on the corner. The one with the fifteen cents invested two-thirds of his capital in crackers and cheese, his companion reminding the grocer meanwhile that he might throw in a little extra, “seein’ as how they were the first customers that mornin’.” The merchant good-naturedly did so, and then turned to answer the other’s question about work.

“What can you do?”

“I’m a printer by trade, but will do anything.”

“How does it happen you are out of work?”

“I was thrown out by the Kansas City strike and have been unable to find a place since.”

“Is he looking for work too?” with a glance that made his customer’s face flush, and a nod toward the fellow from Arkansas, who sat on a box near the stove rapidly making away with more than his half of the breakfast.

The young man shrugged his shoulders, “We woke up in the same straw-stack this morning and he was hungry, that’s all.”

“Well,” returned the store-keeper, as he dropped the

lid of the cracker box with a bang, "You'll not be bothered with him long if you are really hunting a job."

"You put me on the track of a job and I'll show you whether I mean business or not," was the quick reply. To which the grocer made answer as he turned to his task of dusting the shelves: "There's lots of work in Boyd City and lots of men to do it."

The stranger had walked but a little way down the street when a voice close behind him said, "I'm erbliged ter ye fer the feed, pard; reckon I'll shove erlong now."

He stopped and the other continued: "Don't much like the looks of this yer' place no how, an' a feller w'at jes' come by, he said as how thar war heaps o' work in Jonesville, forty miles below. Reckon I'll shove erlong. Ain't got the price of er drink hev' ye? Can't ye set 'em up jest fer old times' sake ye know?" and a cunning gleam crept into the bloodshot eyes of the vagabond.

The other started as he looked keenly at the bloated features of the creature before him, and there was a note of mingled fear and defiance in his voice as he said, "What do you mean? What do you know about old times?"

The tramp shuffled uneasily, but replied with a knowing leer, "Ain't ye Dicky Falkner what used ter live cross the river from Jimpson's stillhouse?"

"Well, what of it?" The note of defiance was stronger.

"Oh nuthin, only I'm Jake Tompkins, that used ter work fer Jimpson at the still. Me'n yer daddy war pards; I used ter set 'em up ter him a heap o' times."

"Yes," replied Dick bitterly, "I know you now. You gave my father whiskey and then laughed when he went home drunk and drove my mother from the cabin to spend the night in the brush. You know it killed her."

"Yer maw allus was weakly-like," faltered the other; "she'd no call ter hitch up with Bill Falkner no how; she ort ter took a man with book larnin' like her daddy,

ole Jedge White. It allus made yer paw mad 'cause she knowed more'n him. But Bill 'lowed he'd tame her an' he shor' tried hit on. Too bad she went an' died, but she ort ter knowed a man o' Bill's spirit would a took his licker when he wanted hit. I recollect ye used ter take a right smart lot yerself fer a kid."

The defiance in the young man's voice gave way to a note of hopeless despair. "Yes," he said, "you and dad made me drink the stuff before I was old enough to know what it would do for me." Then, with a bitter oath, he continued, half to himself, "What difference does it make anyway. Every time I try to break loose something reaches out and pulls me down again. I thought I was free this time sure and here comes this thing. I might as well go to the devil and done with it. Why shouldn't I drink if I want to; whose business is it but my own?" He looked around for the familiar sign of a saloon.

"That's the talk," exclaimed the other with a swagger. "That's how yer paw used ter put it. Your maw warn't much good no how, with her finicky notions 'bout eddicati'n an' sech. A little pone and baken with plenty of good ol' red eye's good 'nough fer us. Yer maw she—"

But he never finished, for Dick caught him by the throat with his left hand, the other clenched ready to strike. The tramp shrank back in a frightened, cowering heap.

"You beast," cried the young man with another oath. "If you dare to take my mother's name in your foul mouth again I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"I didn't go fer to do hit. 'Fore God I didn't go ter. Lemme go Dicky; me'n yer daddy war pards. Lemme go. Yer paw an' me won't bother ye no more, Dicky; he can't; he's dead."

"Dead!" Dick released his grasp and the other sprang to a safe distance. "Dead!" He gazed in amazement at the quaking wretch before him.

The tramp nodded sullenly, feeling at his throat. "Yep, dead," he said hoarsely. "Me an' him war bummin' a freight out o' St. Louie, an' he slipped. I know he war killed 'cause I saw 'em pick him up; six cars went over him an' they kept me in hock fer two months."

Dick sat down on the curbing and buried his face in his hands. "Dead—dead"—he softly repeated to himself. "Dad is dead—killed by the cars in St. Louis. Dead—dead—"

Then all the past life came back to him with a rush: the cabin home across the river from the distillery; the still-house itself, with the rough men who gathered there; the neighboring shanties with their sickly, sad-faced women, and dirty, quarreling children; the store and blacksmith shop at the crossroads in the pinery seven miles away. He saw the river flowing sluggishly at times between banks of drooping willows and tall marsh grass, as though smitten with the fatal spirit of the place, then breaking into hurried movement over pebbly shoals as though trying to escape to some healthier climate; the hill where stood the old pine tree; the cave beneath the great rock by the spring; and the persimmon grove in the bottoms. Then once more he suffered with his mother from his drunken father's rage, and every detail of that awful night in the brush, with the long days and nights of sickness that followed before her death, came back so vividly that he wept again with his face in his hands as he had cried by the rude bedside in the cabin sixteen years ago. Then came the years when he had wandered from his early home and had learned to know life in the great cities. What a life he had found it! He shuddered as it all came back to him now: the many times when inspired by the memory of his mother, he had tried to break away from the evil, degrading things that were in and about him, and the many times he had been dragged back by

the training and memory of his father; the gambling, the fighting, the drinking, the periods of hard work, the struggle to master his trade, and the reckless wasting of wages in times of wild despair.

And now his father was dead—dead—he shuddered. There was nothing now to bind him to the past; he was free.

“Can’t ye give me that drink, Dicky? Jest one little horn. It’ll do us both good, an’ then I’ll shove erlong; jes fer old times’ sake, ye know.”

The voice of the tramp broke in upon his thoughts. For a moment longer he sat there; then started to his feet, a new light in his eye, a new ring in his voice.

“No, Jake,” he said slowly; “I wouldn’t if I could, now. I’m done with the old times forever.” He threw up his head and stood proudly erect while the tramp gazed in awe at something in his face he had never seen before.

“I have only five cents in the world,” continued Dick. “Here, take it. You’ll be hungry again soon and—and—good-bye, Jake—good-bye—”

He turned and walked swiftly away while the other stood staring in astonishment and wonder, first at the coin in his hand, then at the retreating figure. Then with an exclamation, the ragged fellow wheeled and started in the opposite direction toward the railroad yards, to catch a south bound freight.

Dick had walked scarcely a block when a lean hound came trotting across the street. “Dear old Smoke,” he said to himself, his mind going back to the companion of his early struggle—“dear old Smoke.” Then as the half-starved creature came timidly to his side and looked up at him with pleading eyes, he remembered his share of the breakfast, still untouched, in his pocket. “You look like an old friend of mine,” he continued, as he stooped to pat the bony head, “a friend who is never hungry now—but

you're hungry aren't you?" A low whine answered him. "Yes, you're hungry all right." And the next moment a wagging tail was eloquently giving thanks for the rest of the crackers and cheese.

The factories and mills of the city gave forth their early greeting, while the sun tried in vain to drive away the chilly mist. Men with dinner buckets on their arms went hurrying along at the call of whistles; shop-keepers were sweeping, dusting and arranging their goods; a street-car, full of miners, passed with clanging gong; and the fire department horses, out for their morning exercise, clattered down the street. Amid the busy scene walked Dick, without work, without money, without friends, but with a new purpose in his heart that was more than meat or drink. A new feeling of freedom and power made him lift his head and move with a firm and steady step.

All that morning he sought for employment, inquiring at the stores and shops, but receiving little or no encouragement. Toward noon, while waiting for an opportunity to interview the proprietor of a store, he picked up a daily paper that was lying on the counter and, turning to the "want" column, read an advertisement for a man to do general work about the barn and yard. When he had received the usual answer to his request for work, he went at once to the address given in the paper.

"Is Mr. Goodrich in?" he asked of the young man who came forward with a look of inquiry on his face.

"What do you want?" was the curt reply.

"I want to see Mr. Goodrich," came the answer in tones even sharper, and the young man conducted him to the door of the office.

"Well," said a portly middle-aged gentleman, when he had finished dictating a letter to the young lady seated at the typewriter, "what do *you* want?"

"I came in answer to your ad in this morning's *Whistler*," answered Dick.

"Umph—Where did you work last?"

"At Kansas City. I'm a printer by trade, but willing to do anything until I get a start."

"Why aren't you working at your trade?"

"I was thrown out by the strike and have been unable to find anything since."

A look of anger and scorn swept over the merchant's face. "So you're one of that lot, are you? Why don't you fellows learn to take what you can get? Look here." He pointed to a pile of pamphlets lying on the table. "Just came in to-day; they cost me fifty per cent more than I ever paid before, just because you cattle can't be satisfied; and now you want me to give you a place. If I had my way, I'd give you, and such as you, work on the rock pile." And he wheeled his chair toward his desk.

"But," said Dick, "I'm hungry—I must do something—I'm not a beggar—I'll earn every cent you pay me."

"I tell you no," shouted the other. "I won't have men about me who look above their position," and he picked up his pen.

"But, Sir," said Dick again, "what am I to do?"

"I don't care what you do," returned the other. "There is a stone-yard here for such as you."

"Sir," answered Dick, standing very straight, his face as pale as death. "Sir, you will yet learn that it does matter very much what such fellows as I do. I am no more worthy to work on the rock pile than yourself. As a man, I am every bit your equal, and will live to prove it. Good morning, Sir." And he marched out of the office like a soldier on parade, leaving the young lady at the typewriter motionless with amazement, and her employer dumb with rage.

What induced him to utter such words Dick could not

say; he only knew that they were true, and they seemed somehow to have been forced from him; though in spite of his just anger he laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation before he was fairly away from the building.

The factory whistles blew for dinner, but there was no dinner for Dick; they blew again for work at one o'clock, but still there was nothing for Dick to do. All that afternoon he continued his search with the same result—"We don't need you." Some, it is true, were kind in their answers. One old gentleman, a real estate man, Dick felt sure was about to help him, but he was called away on business, and the poor fellow went on his weary search again.

Then the whistles blew for six o'clock, and the workmen, their faces stained with the marks of toil, hurried along the streets toward home. Through hungry eyes, Dick watched the throng, wondering what each worked at during the day and what they would have for supper.

The sun went behind a bank of dull, lead-colored clouds and the wind sprang up again, so sharp and cold that the citizens turned up the collars of their coats and drew their wraps about them, while Dick sought shelter from the chilly blast in an open hallway. Suddenly a policeman appeared before him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," answered Dick.

"Wal, ye'd better be doing something. I've had my eye on you all the afternoon. I'll run ye in if I ketch ye hanging round any more. Get a move on now." And Dick stepped out on the sidewalk once more to face the bitter wind.

Walking as rapidly as possible, he made his way north on Broadway, past the big hotel, all aglow with light and warmth, past vacant lots and factories, until he reached

the ruins of an old smelter just beyond a network of railroad tracks. He had noticed the place earlier in the day as he passed it on his way to the brickyard. Groping about over the fallen walls of the furnace, stumbling over scraps of iron and broken timbers in the dusk, he searched for a corner that would in some measure protect him from the wind. It grew dark very fast, and soon he tripped and fell against an old boiler lying upturned in the ruin. Throwing out his hand to save himself, by chance he caught the door of the firebox, and in a moment more was inside, crouching in the accumulated dirt, iron rust and ashes. At least the wind could not get at him here; and leaning his back against the iron wall of his strange bed-room, tired and hungry, he fell asleep.