

The Passing of Edward

By Richard Middleton

I found Dorothy sitting sedately on the beach, with a mass of black seaweed twined in her hands and her bare feet sparkling white in the sun. Even in the first glow of recognition I realised that she was paler than she had been the summer before, and yet I cannot blame myself for the tactlessness of my question.

“Where’s Edward?” I said; and I looked about the sands for a sailor suit and a little pair of prancing legs.

While I looked, Dorothy’s eyes watched mine inquiringly, as if she wondered what I might see.

“Edward’s dead,” she said simply. “He died last year, after you left.”

For a moment I could only gaze at the child in silence, and ask myself what reason there was in the thing that had hurt her so. Now that I knew that Edward played with her no more, I could see that there was a shadow upon her face too dark for her years, and that she had lost, to some extent, that exquisite carelessness of poise which makes children so young. Her voice was so calm that I might have thought her forgetful had I not seen an instant of patent pain in her wide eyes.

“I’m sorry, I said at length. “ very, very, sorry indeed. I had brought down my car to take you for a drive, as I promised.”

“Oh! Edward *would* have liked that,” she answered thoughtfully; “he was so fond of motors.

She swung round suddenly and looked at the sands behind her with staring eyes.

“I thought I heard—” She broke off in confusion.

I, too, had believed for an instant that I had heard something that was not the wind or the distant children or the smooth sea hissing along the beach. During that golden summer which linked me with the dead, Edward had been wont, in moments of elation, to puff up and down the sands, in artistic representation of a nobby, noisy motor-car. But the dead may play no more, and there was nothing there but the sands and the hot sky and Dorothy.

“You had better let me take you for a run, Dorothy,” I said. “The man will drive, and we can talk as we go along.”

She nodded gravely, and began pulling on her sandy stockings.

“It did not hurt him,” she said inconsequently.

The restraint in her voice pained me like a blow.

“Oh, don’t, dear, don’t!” I cried. “There is nothing to do but forget.”

“I have forgotten, quite,” she answered, pulling at her shoe-laces with calm fingers. “It was ten months ago.”

We walked up to the front, where the car was waiting, and Dorothy settled herself among the cushions with a little sigh of contentment, the human quality of which brought me a certain relief. If only she would laugh or cry! I sat down by her side, but the man waited by the open door.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he answered, looking about him in confusion, “I thought I saw a young gentleman with you.”

He shut the door with a bang, and in a minute we were running through the town. I knew that Dorothy was watching my face with her wounded eyes; but I did not look at her until the green fields leapt up on either side of the white road.

"It is only for a little while that we may not see him," I said; "all this is nothing."

"I have forgotten," she repeated. "I think this is a very nice motor."

I had not previously complained of the motor, but I was wishing then that it would cease its poignant imitation of a little dead boy, a boy who would play no more. By the touch of Dorothy's sleeve against mine I knew that she could hear it too. And the miles flew by, green and brown and golden, while I wondered what use I might be in the world, who could not help a child to forget. Possibly there was another way, I thought.

"Tell me how it happened," I said.

Dorothy looked at me with inscrutable eyes, and spoke in a voice without emotion.

"He caught a cold, and was very ill in bed. I went in to see him, and he was all white and faded. I said to him, 'How are you Edward?' and he said, 'I shall get up early in the morning to catch beetles.' I didn't see him any more."

"Poor little chap!" I murmured.

"I went to the funeral," she continued monotonously. "It was very rainy, and I threw a little bunch of flowers down into the hole. There was a whole lot of flowers there; but I think Edward liked apples better than flowers."

"Did you cry?" I said cruelly.

She paused. "I don't know. I suppose so. It was a long time ago; I think I have forgotten."

Even while she spoke I heard Edward puffing along the sands: Edward who had been so fond of apples.

"I cannot stand this any longer," I said aloud. "Let's get out and walk in the woods for a change."

She agreed, with a depth of comprehension that terrified me; and the motor pulled up with a jerk at a spot where hardly a post served to mark where the woods commenced and the wayside grass stopped. We took one of the dim paths which the rabbits had made and forced our way through the undergrowth into the peaceful twilight of the trees.

"You haven't got very sunburnt this year," I said as we walked.

"I don't know why. I've been out on the beach all the days. Sometimes I've played, too."

I did not ask her what games she had played, or who had been her play-friend. Yet even there in the quiet woods I knew that Edward was holding her back from me. It is true that, in his boy's way, he had been fond of me; but I should not have dared to take her out without him in the days when his live lips had filled the beach with song, and his small brown body had danced among the surf. Now it seemed that I had been disloyal to him.

And presently we came to a clearing where the leaves of forgotten years lay brown and rotten beneath our feet, and the air was full of the dryness of death.

"Let's be going back. What do you think, Dorothy?" I said.

"I think," she said slowly,— "I think that this would be a very good place to catch beetles."

A wood is full of secret noises, and that is why, I suppose, we heard a pair of small quick feet come with a dance of triumph through the rustling bracken. For a minute we listened deeply, and then Dorothy broke from my side with a piercing call on her lips.

"Oh, Edward, Edward!" she cried; "Edward!"

But the dead may play no more, and presently she came back to me with the tears that are the riches of childhood streaming down her face.

“I can hear him, I can hear him,” she sobbed; “but I cannot see him. Never, never again.”

And so I led her back to the motor. But in her tears I seemed to find a promise of peace that she had not known before.

Now Edward was no very wonderful little boy; it may be that he was jealous and vain and greedy; yet now, it seemed as he lay in his small grave with the memory of Dorothy’s flowers about him, he had wrought this kindness for his sister. Yes, even though we heard no more than the birds in the branches and the wind swaying the scented bracken; even though he had passed with another summer, and the dead and the love of the dead may rise no more from the grave.