

The Gloomy Shadow

By W. C. Morrow

My father enjoyed, among his other scientific attainments, a large family and an intimate acquaintance with the mysteries of phrenology. He was likewise an extremely methodical man, which is tantamount to saying that he was a conscientious man. There can be no conception of duty without a matured and coherent plan for its performance.

My father's principal idea of duty to his children found expression in the choice of proper vocations for them, and he based this choice upon careful phrenological analysis of their several heads. It is no small trick to be a good phrenologist. It involves intimate knowledge of cranial anatomy coupled with vast experience and intelligent observation. My father took his children in hand when they were yet of a very tender age and from a survey of their brain conformations he plotted their lives. Thus, to my eldest sister (next to whom I came in the order of introduction to life), he allotted the life pastime of teacher. For the brother who came next to me, both in sex and succession, he chose the distinction of the whistle and billy. To the next, a sister, he assigned the disagreeable task of a dutiful wife, and so on down to the very last chapter of this long reiteration of his personal heredity, with one exception, and that was I.

He had never diagnosticated my particular brain disease.

Why was it? I had asked myself that question a million times. I had asked my mother also, but she was a timid woman and contented herself with putting her arms around me and kissing me, and telling me that my father knew best, that I, being his first male offspring, probably was reserved for some very high walk in life. These puttings-off only half reassured me, for I knew that my father was a hard, though righteous, master in his own house, and that not a member of the family, from my mother down to the little two-year-old, whom my father already had set apart to disgrace the family as a politician, dared question his motives or suggest his policy.

Time passed, and yet my career had not been chosen. Of all the children I was the only one who had not been made up into a firecracker to explode at the proper time. I was becoming a big boy, with a violent tendency to legs. A white down was beginning to form upon my upper lip, and by this and other indications I knew that soon I should be a Man.

Why had my father neglected me? The more I thought about it the more mysterious his neglect became. I had arrived at an age when the human mind begins to operate of its own volition; when fancy runs riot and imagination is opening its eyes; when collar and cravat are ceasing to be nuisances, and the ripe sunset falls upon the willing eye; when the plaint of the whippoorwill in the twilight sets the soul a-dreaming, and the twinkling firefly kindles a spark of unrest; when Nature, after yawns interminable, rouses at last into wakefulness and folds us lovingly and caressingly in her warm embrace.

With adolescence comes, in a boy, strength; in a girl, tenderness. I feared my father, but I loved him. Did he despise me? I knew an old lightning-blasted tree that always reminded me of my father. Tall and gaunt and thin it stood, and one gnarled branch remained; and if I looked at it from a certain point of view it seemed to be my father standing there in awful solitude, and with uplifted hand calling down the curse of heaven upon me; but if I got on the other side the expression changed entirely, and the tree looked like my father invoking heaven's blessing upon me. Which point of view was it that marked my destiny?

With boyish adolescence comes strength, and with strength independence. Why should I fear my father? He was a man—was not I also nearly a man? He had been kind to me all my life. He had laid violent hands upon me only once, and that was a long time ago, when he caught me trying to brain one of the little slaves with a heavy piece of iron; and then he whipped me till I was ill, and my mother cried a whole day because I was delirious and with a fever from the punishment. But I was a small boy then—what had I to fear now? I would go to my father and ask him to do for me what he had done for his other children.

Yet I hesitated. In the sharpened condition of my mental faculties I reflected upon some strange things I had seen and not understood. I had often detected my father watching me closely and with what I believed was a troubled look. When he would find that I had discovered him he would appear ashamed and more troubled yet. What did it mean? Had the gaunt old tree in the meadow cast its shadow upon me? Was it curses, or was it blessings? There must be light in order that shadows may exist. The gnarled branch pointed to heaven, whence light comes—and also curses.

Thus was I torn and racked. Discontent took up its habitation with me. Could not my father see that the flower was fading and the seed-pod ripening? He had dug the ground for the sowing, or would the seed be scattered among brambles and briars and strangled in the germination? I blamed my father—blamed him aloud to my mother; and I wish now that my tongue had been cut out for doing it.

There came the time when I could wait no longer. I went to my father and demanded, firmly but respectfully, as a duty from a father to a son, that he apply science to the laying out of a plan for my future conduct.

I shall never forget the profound astonishment, pain, anxiety and embarrassment that my father manifested when I made my demand. At first he showed anger, impatience and contempt, but these were succeeded by a pity that transfixed me, and then by a horror that drove me mad, my brain awhirl and ugly itching and turmoil rattling through my nerves. Quick and intelligent, he saw my rebellion, my exasperation, my wounded self-esteem, my turbulent blood surging, my jerking biceps, my grinding teeth, my rambling, unconscious and predatory finger-grasp, and then he was frightened and pale. I saw it plainly. Try as much as he would to conceal it, I saw it, I saw it! My father afraid of me! My father cowering before me, white and trembling! My father, a great, strong man, standing aghast before his puny son! My father, who had faced death with Scott in Mexico and who had fought like a tiger by Stonewall Jackson's side—this old soldier of a hundred battles, with a saber cut across his cheek, a man who could face the leveled pistol of an opposing duelist without the tremor of a nerve—this strong man, towering in manly strength and dignity and pride, stood a-bashed and fear-stricken before a miserable boy, his own son, whom a word or a blow would have sent cowering and howling away like a whipped dog!

What did it mean?

“Father,” I demanded, “tell me what you mean.

“My son,” said he, weakly and tremulously, “listen to your father. You are my eldest son. The honor of my name will rest upon your shoulders. Be content. Be manly. Respect your mother. Take life as you find it, and do the best you can for yourself and your mother and me. Be just to all. And mark you, my son: If ever temptation should assail you; if ever reason should feel inclined to succumb to passion; if ever the chains of wholesome restraint should be tugged at by the rash hand of Desire, then remember your mother—a good and gentle mother, who prays for you oftener than you dream of, who watches over you and loves you and imbues your circumstances with the tender essence of her sweet presence. Be her stay and comfort in her

declining years. Let your arm gather the strength of trusty manhood, to be expended in shielding her from rough buffetings; and do not thus early in life permit Discontent to whisper in your ear vague longings that, being resonant, are empty, hollow and delusive. Go, my son.”

It was the strangest speech I had heard in all my life. I left him, chilled to the marrow, sick at heart, touched by his appeal, but bewildered by the occasion of its delivery, numb of intellect, sore with puzzlings, and above all aching with a terror that, refusing to take shape and be torn out like an affronting eye, worked gnawingly at my vitals and stabbed me with invisible daggers.

What should I do? My mother was left to me—always a good mother, patient, kind and attentive. Did my father regard me as a monster? If so, did my mother also? She had given no sign of it—she had always been the same mother to me. Had she ever stood at the edge of the meadow and seen the riven tree calling down curses upon me, or had she ever gone to the other side where stood the giant old oak with the muscadine vine climbing to its summit and trying to strangle the very angel that bore it heavenward and seen the other and gender aspect?

I sought my mother without delay. Why did I? What was there in common between her sweet gentleness and my tumultuous unrest? Who can measure the strength of that mysterious and invisible cord which binds mother and son, though different as heaven and hell—this attenuated link, invisible as truth, impalpable as purity, inconceivable as right, impotent as strength, unimaginable as eternity? Can you weigh the odor of a rose? Would you measure off into rods, perches or poles the efficacy of a sigh, the aching of unsatisfied desire, the hope that feeds upon faith, the fondness that abides with possession, the longing of love, the grasping of affection, the tenderness born of fear, and, greater and grander than all, the community of hereditary instincts?

Where was my mother? I had lost no lime in seeking her. But where was she? She was not where I expected to find her—where I had been sure of finding her. She ought to have been sitting in her low wicker chair in the bay window of the family room, sewing, and now and then looking up at the clock to see if it was lime to order dinner. The little table, with innumerable and not understandable compartments, and mysterious nooks and corners, ought to have been just at her right elbow. Her embroidered footstool should have been in front of her chair, and her daintily slippered feet should have been resting upon it. The old Maltese cat, gray, wise and wicked, should have been curled up on the rug that the ottoman rested upon, utterly unconcerned over the ferocious aspect of the tiger’s head on that end of the rug which was nearest the grate. When I burst into the room my mother was not there!

What is superstition? What mean those whispered and unconscious deductions from the unusual? Snap a single cog in the machinery of life, and there ensue a bursting and a rattling and a banging that wake us up to the *realization* of living! Enjoyment is disturbance. There is life only in turmoil, in derangement of ordered things, in perversions of law. Hunt no further for the secret of the anarchist’s existence, the scrambling of the politician, the source of ambition’s whispering and sighing and wrangling down all the life-lighted avenues of human existence. Where would be the pleasure of living were it not for the novelty of expected death?

She was not there. Then where was she? The old cat, warped with sin, obsequious as a Pharisee, patient as time, blinked at me—and kept a wary eye on my uncertain boot. The tiger’s head yawned sleepily and impudently. The clock lacked thirty seconds of the time for ordering dinner.

My mother suddenly emerged from the parlor, the tall form of my father following. I saw the gaunt tree in the meadow calling down curses upon me. My mother was very pale. Her eyes wandered and her lips were white. She walked as in a dream—as in a nightmare, wherein skeletons and bloody flesh were busy disemboweling the repose of wistful sleep. She saw me.

Had I gone to her and struck her in the face (God forgive the thought!) or stabbed her to the heart with a knife (Heaven blast me for the sacrilegious imagining!) she could not have been more sorely stricken than she was at beholding me. She looked at me in horror. Her eyes stared wildly. Her lips, becoming purple, parted in desperate agony and fear; and, with upthrown hands and a cry that rang all the way down from destiny to death, she fell senseless to the floor.

She was my mother, and I loved her; but that unconscious glance of horror, that look of repulsion—blacker than night and deeper than hell—whence came it? The shadow of the tree had fallen upon her.

In what was I horrible? Was all repulsion centered in me, and did it blaze from my eyes, dribble from my finger-tips and exude from the pores of my skin? The tree came from the meadow into the room. With outstretched arm it pointed to the door and said:

“You have frightened your mother; go!”

The cat leered at me as I slunk away, and the tiger’s head yawned with ineffable relief.

This mystery, this awful shadow, this impenetrable darkness, this enshrouding mist that enveloped me—whence came it? Whither would it lead me? Into what devious paths should I wander in its enfolding obscurity?

Science remained. Through the mist it beckoned dimly, beyond the darkness it faintly shone, above the shadow it loomed grim and immovable. Faith is the perverted longing for knowledge. Learning is the cradle of despair. I would be rocked to sleep.

I knew a phrenologist who, like my father, was an able man. He did not know me—so much the better. I sought that man. It is a strange tale, my friends.

He was a professional phrenologist, and kept a shop where he examined heads for a moderate charge. He glanced at me only casually when I entered the room, because I was only a boy. (I have since learned that his principal business was the determination of occupations for those who already had chosen the course of their lives.) He was quite indifferent to me, but I am certain he was polite when he asked me to be seated.

I told him what I wanted. He laid his hands carelessly upon my head, but he had hardly done more than that when he sprang back and his face was livid with terror.

Here we were—we two—I a youth, he a man. It was not a large room. I was a strong lad. I walked to the door, locked it and put the key into my pocket.

There were only two of us—he and I. The blinding mist had come with me into the room, the shadow also was there and the darkness. I believe that through it all I saw the tall, lightning-blasted tree in the meadow. Only two of us and a mystery between us, the truth in his consciousness. I had strong arms. My fingers had a firm grasp and, no doubt, they could span the neck of an ordinary man. In my time I had squeezed the juice out of grapes and from the juice I had made wine and upon drinking the wine I had seen marvelous and enchanting visions that were sweeter than my hope of heaven.

I was calm about it at first, but I was bound to know what he knew—determined he should tell me what horrible thing my cranium revealed. I once had strangled a vicious dog—choked him till his tongue hung out and his eyes were ready to burst from their sockets, and then threw his carcass aside. I repeat that I was calm at first; but when he flatly refused to tell me, there came a strange kind of creeping into my arms—an intense accumulation of nervous force that clamored for exercise.

“Tell me!” I demanded, softly it is true, but the tone made him cower.

“I cannot,” he cried.

“Tell me!”

That creeping feeling in my arms was getting beyond control.

“Impossible!” he implored.

“It is too horrible!”

“Tell me!”

My hands had a peculiar way of opening and closing, and they felt desperate, hungry, empty.

“What do you wish to know?” asked the man, trying to put me off.

“I wish to know,” I answered, still calmly, “what vocation I am suited for.”

The creeping feeling in my arms was steadily assuming the more decided form of outreaching, and my fingers itched amazingly. He saw it.

“There is only one thing in life that you are fitted to be,” he finally said, “and it pains me infinitely to add that it is the only thing which Nature in her inscrutable wisdom has decided that you cannot avoid being.”

“And what is that?”

“A murderer!”

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My friends, what is destiny? For one, honor; for another, a rope. I do not complain. I love and respect Nature too much to whimper at her decrees. A gaunt lightning-stripped tree in a meadow, the plaint of a whippoorwill in the twilight, a Maltese cat sodden with crime, a sweet face blanched with horror—these are the microscopes with which gentle Nature provides us. (My dear sir, you are pulling that strap too hard—it hurts.) I am not talking for mercy or pity. Behold in me the infinite faith of one who loves Nature and bows to her law. (Keep the cap a moment longer, and then you may put it on me.) She marked out my life; I followed her inclination. Farewell; may you all be happy as I am now in having fulfilled the destiny under which I was born! (Will that knot slip easily? There—but don’t draw it too tight; my head won’t slip through!)