

The Son of My Friend

T.S. Arthur

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THE SON OF MY FRIEND.

"I'VE been thinking," said I, speaking to my husband, who stood drawing on his gloves.

"Have you?" he answered; "then give me the benefit of your thoughts."

"That we shall have to give a party. You know we've accepted a number of invitations this winter, and it's but right that we should contribute our share of social entertainment."

"I have thought as much myself," was his reply. "And so far we stand agreed. But, as I am very busy just now, the heaviest part of the burden will fall on you."

"There is a way of making it light, you know," I returned.

"How?" he queried.

"By employing a professional caterer. He will supply everything for the table, and furnish waiters. We will have nothing to do but receive our guests."

My husband shrugged his shoulders and smiled, as he said, "What will it cost?"

"Almost anything we please. But the size of the company will have the most to do with that."

"Say we invite one hundred."

"Then we can make the cost range anywhere between three hundred dollars and a thousand."

"A large sum to throw away on a single evening's entertainment of our friends. I am very sure I could put it to a better use."

"Very likely," I answered. "Still, we cannot well help ourselves. Unless we give a party, we shall have to decline invitations in future. But there is no obligation resting on us to make it sensational. Let the Hardings and the Marygolds emulate extravagance in this line; we must be content with a fair entertainment; and no friend worth the name will have any the less respect for us."

"All that is a question of money and good fame," said my husband, his voice falling into a more serious tone. "I can make it three, five, or ten hundred dollars, and forget all about the cost in a week. But the wine and the brandy will not set so easily on my conscience."

A slight but sudden chill went through my nerves.

"If we could only throw them out?"

"There is no substitute," replied my husband, "that people in our circle would accept. If we served coffee, tea, and chocolate instead, we would be laughed at."

"Not by the fathers and mothers, I think. At least not by those who have grown-up-sons," I returned. "Only last week I heard Mrs. Gordon say that cards for a party always gave her a fit of low spirits. She has three sons, you know."

"Rather fast young men, as the phrase is. I've noticed them in supper-rooms, this winter, several times. A little too free with the wine."

We both stood silent for the space of nearly a minute.

"Well, Agnes," said my husband, breaking the silence, "how are we to decide this matter?"

"We must give a party, or decline invitations in future," I replied.

"Which shall it be?" His eyes looked steadily into mine. I saw that the thing troubled him.

"Turn it in your thought during the day, and we'll talk it over this evening," said I.

After tea my husband said, laying down the newspaper he had been reading and looking at me across the centre-table, "What about the party, Agnes?"

"We shall have to give it, I suppose." We must drop out of the fashionable circle in which I desired to remain; or do our part in it. I had thought it all over—looking at the dark side and at the bright side—and settled the question. I had my weaknesses as well as others. There was social eclat in a party, and I wanted my share.

"Wine, and brandy, and all?" said my husband.

"We cannot help ourselves. It is the custom of society; and society is responsible, not we."

"There is such a thing as individual responsibility," returned my husband. "As to social responsibility, it is an intangible thing; very well to talk about, but reached by no law, either of conscience or the statute-book. You and

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I, and every other living soul, must answer to God for what we do. No custom or law of society will save us from the consequences of our own acts. So far we stand alone."

"But if society bind us to a certain line of action, what are we to do? Ignore society?"

"If we must ignore society or conscience, what then?"

His calm eyes were on my face. "I'm afraid," said I, "that you are magnifying this thing into an undue importance."

He sighed heavily, and dropped his eyes away from mine. I watched his countenance, and saw the shadows of uneasy thought gathering about his lips and forehead.

"It is always best," he remarked, "to consider the probable consequences of what we intend doing. If we give this party, one thing is certain."

"What?"

"That boys and young men, some of them already in the ways that lead to drunkenness and ruin, will be enticed to drink. We will put temptation to their lips and smilingly invite them to taste its dangerous sweets. By our example we will make drinking respectable. If we serve wine and brandy to our guests, young and old, male and female, what do we less than any dram-seller in the town? Shall we condemn him, and ourselves be blameless? Do we call his trade a social evil of the direst character, and yet ply our guests with the same tempting stimulants that his wretched customers crowd his bar-room to obtain?"

I was borne down by the weight of what my husband said. I saw the evil that was involved in this social use of wines and liquors which he so strongly condemned. But, alas that I must say it! neither principle nor conscience were strong enough to overcome my weak desire to keep in good standing with my fashionable friends. I wanted to give a party—I felt that I must give a party. Gladly would I have dispensed with liquor; but I had not the courage to depart from the regular order of things. So I decided to give the party.

"Very well, Agnes," said my husband, when the final decision was made. "If the thing has to be done, let it be well and liberally done."

I had a very dear friend—a Mrs. Martindale. As school-girls, we were warmly attached to each other, and as we grew older our friendship became closer and tenderer. Marriage, that separates so many, did not separate us. Our lots were cast in the same city, and in the same social circle. She had an only son, a young man of fine intellect and much promise, in whom her life seemed bound up. He went into the army at an early period of the war, and held the rank of second lieutenant; conducting himself bravely. A slight, but disabling wound sent him home a short time previous to the surrender of Lee, and before he was well enough to join his regiment, it was mustered out of service.

Albert Martindale left his home, as did thousands of other young men, with his blood untouched by the fire of alcohol, and returned from the war, as thousands of other young men returned, with its subtle poison in all his veins.

The dread of this very thing had haunted his mother during all the years of his absence in the army.

"Oh, Agnes," she had often said to me, with eyes full of tears, "it is not the dread of his death that troubles me most. I have tried to adjust that sad event between myself and God. In our fearful crisis he belongs to his country. I could not withhold him, though my heart seemed breaking when I let him go. I live in the daily anticipation of a telegram announcing death or a terrible wound. Yet that is not the thing of fear I dread; but something worse—his moral defection. I would rather he fell in battle than come home to me with manhood wrecked. What I most dread is intemperance. There is so much drinking among officers. It is the curse of our army. I pray that he may escape; yet weep, and tremble, and fear while I pray. Oh, my friend I think his fall into this terrible vice would kill me."

Alas for my friend! Her son came home to her with tainted breath and fevered blood. It did not kill her. Love held her above despair, and gave her heart a new vitality. She must be a savior; not a weak mourner over wrecked hopes.

With what a loving care and wise discretion did she set herself to work to withdraw her son from the dangerous path in which his feet were walking! and she would have been successful, but for one thing. The customs of society were against her. She could not keep him away from the parties and evening entertainments of her friends; and here all the good resolutions she had led him to make were as flax fibres in the flame of a candle. He had no strength to resist when wine sparkled and flashed all around him, and bright eyes and ruby lips invited him to drink. It takes more than ordinary firmness of principle to abstain in a fashionable company of ladies and

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gentlemen, where wine and brandy flow as water. In the case of Albert Martindale, two things were against him. He was not strong enough to set himself against any tide of custom, in the first place; and in the second, he had the allurements of appetite.

I knew all this, when, with my own hand, I wrote on one of our cards of invitation, "Mr. and Mrs. Martindale and family;" but did not think of it, until the card was written. As I laid it aside with the rest, the truth flashed on me and sent a thrill of pain along every nerve. My heart grew sick and my head faint, as thoughts of the evil that might come to the son of my friend, in consequence of the temptation I was about to throw in his way, rushed through my mind. My first idea was to recall the card, and I lifted it from the table with a half-formed resolution to destroy it. But a moment's reflection changed this purpose. I could not give a large entertainment and leave out my nearest friend and her family.

The pain and wild agitation of that moment were dreadful. I think all good spirits and angels that could get near my conscious life strove with me, for the sake of a soul in peril, to hold me back from taking another step in the way I was going; for it was not yet too late to abandon the party.

When, after a long struggle with right convictions, I resumed my work of filling up the cards of invitation, I had such a blinding headache that I could scarcely see the letters my pen was forming; and when the task was done, I went to bed, unable to bear up against the double burden of intense bodily and mental anguish.

The cards went out, and the question of the party was settled beyond recall. But that did not soothe the disquietude of my spirit. I felt the perpetual burden of a great and troubling responsibility. Do what I would, there was for me no ease of mind. Waking or sleeping, the thought of Albert Martindale and his mother haunted me continually.

At last the evening came, and our guests began to arrive, in party dresses and party faces, richly attired, smiling and gracious. Among the earliest were Mr. and Mrs. Martindale, their son and daughter.

The light in my friend's eyes, as we clasped hands and looked into each other's faces, did not conceal the shadows of anxious fear that rested on them. As I held Albert's hand, and gazed at him for a moment, a pang shot through my heart. Would he go out as pure and manly as he had come in? Alas, no! for I had made provision for his fall.

The company was large and fashionable. I shall not attempt a description of the dresses, nor venture an estimate touching the value of diamonds. I have no heart for this. No doubt the guests enjoyed themselves to the degree usual on such occasions. I cannot say as much for at least one of the hosts. In the supper-room stood a table, the sight of which had smitten my eyes with pain. Its image was perpetually before me. All the evening, while my outward eyes looked into happy faces, my inward gaze rested gloomily on decanters of brandy and bottles of wine crowding the supper-table, to which I was soon to invite the young men—mere boys, some of them—and maidens, whose glad voices filled the air of my drawing-rooms.

I tried to console myself by the argument that I was only doing as the rest did—following a social custom; and that society was responsible—not the individual. But this did not lift the weight of concern and self-condemnation that so heavily oppressed me.

At last word came that all was ready in the supper-room. The hour was eleven. Our guests passed in to where smoking viands, rich confectionery and exhilarating draughts awaited them. We had prepared a liberal entertainment, a costly feast of all available delicacies. Almost the first sound that greeted my ears after entering the supper-room was the "pop" of a champagne cork. I looked in the direction from whence it came, and saw a bottle in the hands of Albert Martindale. A little back from the young man stood his mother. Our eyes met. Oh, the pain and reproach in the glance of my friend! I could not bear it, but turned my face away.

I neither ate nor drank anything. The most tempting dish had no allurements for my palate, and I shivered at the thought of tasting wine. I was strangely and unnaturally disturbed; yet forced to commend myself and be affable and smiling to our guests.

"Observe Mrs. Gordon," I heard a lady near me say in a low voice to her companion.

"What of her?" was returned.

"Follow the direction of her eyes."

I did so, as well as the ladies near me, and saw that Mrs. Gordon was looking anxiously at one of her sons, who was filling his glass for, it might be, the second or third time.

"It is no place for that young man," one of them remarked. "I pity his mother. Tom is a fine fellow at heart,

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and has a bright mind; but he is falling into habits that will, I fear, destroy him. I think he has too much self-respect to visit bar-rooms frequently; but an occasion like this gives him a liberty that is freely used to his hurt. It is all very respectable; and the best people set an example he is too ready to follow."

I heard no more, but that was quite enough to give my nerves a new shock and fill my heart with a new inquietude. A few minutes afterwards I found myself at the side of Mrs. Gordon. To a remark that I made she answered in an absent kind of way, as though the meaning of what I said did not reach her thought. She looked past me; I followed her eyes with mine, and saw her youngest boy, not yet eighteen, with a glass of champagne to his lips. He was drinking with a too apparent sense of enjoyment. The sigh that passed the mother's lips smote my ears with accusation. "Mrs. Carleton!" A frank, cheery voice dropped into my ear. It was that of Albert Martindale, the son of my friend. He was handsome, and had a free, winning manner. I saw by the flush in his cheeks, and the gleam in his eyes, that wine had already quickened the flow of blood in his veins.

"You are enjoying yourself," I said.

"Oh, splendidly!" then bending to my ear, he added.—"You've given the finest entertainment of the season."

"Hush!" I whispered, raising my finger. Then added, in a warning tone—"Enjoy it in moderation, Albert."

His brows knit slightly. The crowd parted us, and we did not meet again during the evening.

By twelve o'clock, most of the ladies had withdrawn from the supper-room; but the enticement of wine held too many of the men there—young and old. Bursts of coarse laughter, loud exclamations, and snatches of song rang out from the company in strange confusion. It was difficult to realize that the actors in this scene of revelry were gentlemen, and gentlemen's sons, so called, and not the coarse frequenters of a corner tavern.

Guests now began to withdraw quietly. It was about half-past twelve when Mrs. Martindale came down from the dressing-room, with her daughter, and joined Mr. Martindale in the hall, where he had been waiting for them.

"Where is Albert?" I heard the mother ask.

"In the supper-room, I presume; I've looked for him in the parlors," Mr. Martindale answered.

"I will call him for you," I said, coming forward.

"Oh, do if you please," my friend replied. There was a husky tremor in her voice.

I went to the supper-room. All the ladies had retired, and the door was shut. What a scene for a gentleman's house presented itself! Cigars had been lighted, and the air was thick with smoke. As I pushed open the door, my ear was fairly stunned by the confusion of sounds. There was a hush of voices, and I saw bottles from many hands set quickly upon the table, and glasses removed from lips already too deeply stained with wine. With three or four exceptions, all of this company were young men and boys. Near the door was the person I sought.

"Albert!" I called; and the young man came forward. His face was darkly flushed, and his eyes red and glittering.

"Albert, your mother is going," I said.

"Give her my compliments," he answered, with an air of mock courtesy, "and tell her that she has my gracious permission."

"Come!" I urged; "she is waiting for you."

He shook his head resolutely. "I'm not going for an hour, Mrs. Carleton. Tell mother not to trouble herself. I'll be home in good time."

I urged him, but in vain.

"Tell him that he *must* come!" Mrs. Martindale turned on her husband an appealing look of distress, when I gave her Albert's reply.

But the father did not care to assert an authority which might not be heeded, and answered, "Let him enjoy himself with the rest. Young blood beats quicker than old."

The flush of excited feeling went out of Mrs. Martindale's face. I saw it but for an instant after this reply from her husband; but like a sun-painting, its whole expression was transferred to a leaf of memory, where it is as painfully vivid now as on that never-to-be-forgotten evening. It was pale and convulsed, and the eyes full of despair. A dark presentiment of something terrible had fallen upon her—the shadow of an approaching woe that was to burden all her life.

My friend passed out from my door, and left me so wretched that I could with difficulty rally my feelings to give other parting guests a pleasant word. Mrs. Gordon had to leave in her carriage without her sons, who gave no heed to the repeated messages she sent to them.

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At last, all the ladies were gone; but there still remained a dozen young men in the supper-room, from whence came to my ears a sickening sound of carousal. I sought my chamber, and partly disrobing threw myself on a bed. Here I remained in a state of wretchedness impossible to describe for over an hour, when my husband came in.

"Are they all gone?" I asked, rising.

"All, thank God!" he answered, with a sigh of relief. Then, after a moment's pause, he said—"If I live a thousand years, Agnes, the scene of to-night shall never be repeated in my house! I feel not only a sense of disgrace, but worse—a sense of guilt! What have we been doing? Giving our influence and our money to help in the works of elevating and refining society? or in the work of corrupting and debasing it? Are the young men who left our house a little while ago, as strong for good as when they came in? Alas! alas! that we must answer, No! What if Albert Martindale were our son?"

This last sentence pierced me as if it had been a knife.

"He went out just now," continued Mr. Carleton, "so much intoxicated that he walked straight only by an effort."

"Why did you let him go?" I asked, fear laying suddenly its cold hand on my heart. "What if harm should come to him?"

"The worst harm will be a night at the station house, should he happen to get into a drunken brawl on his way home," my husband replied.

I shivered as I murmured, "His poor mother!"

"I thought of her," replied Mr. Carleton, "as I saw him depart just now, and said to myself bitterly, 'To think of sending home from my house to his mother a son in that condition!' And he was not the only one!"

We were silent after that. Our hearts were so heavy that we could not talk. It was near daylight before I slept, and then my dreams were of so wild and strange a character that slumber was brief and unrefreshing.

The light came dimly in through half-drawn curtains on the next morning when a servant knocked at my door.

"What is wanted?" I asked.

"Did Mr. Albert Martindale sleep here last night?"

I sprang from my bed, strangely agitated, and partly opening the chamber door, said, in a voice whose unsteadiness I could not control, "Why do you ask, Katy? Who wants to know?"

"Mrs. Martindale has sent to inquire. The girl says he didn't come home last night."

"Tell her that he left our house about two o'clock," I replied; and shutting the chamber door, staggered back to the bed and fell across it, all my strength gone for the moment.

"Send her word to inquire at one of the police stations," said my husband, bitterly.

I did not answer, but lay in a half stupor, under the influence of benumbing mental pain. After a while I arose, and, looking out, saw everything clothed in a white mantle, and the snow falling in large flakes, heavily but silently, through the still air. How the sight chilled me. That the air was piercing cold, I knew by the delicate frost-pencilings all over the window panes.

After breakfast, I sent to Mrs. Martindale a note of inquiry about Albert. A verbal answer came from the distracted mother, saying that he was still absent, and that inquiry of the police had failed to bring any intelligence in regard to him. It was still hoped that he had gone home with some friend, and would return during the day.

Steadily the snow continued to fall, and as the wind had risen since morning, it drifted heavily. By ten o'clock it was many inches deep, and there was no sign of abatement. My suspense and fear were so oppressive that, in spite of the storm, I dressed myself and went out to call on my friend. I found her in her chamber, looking very pale, and calmer than I had hoped to find her. But the calmness I soon saw to be a congelation of feeling. Fear of the worst had frozen the wild waves into stillness.

"God knows best," she said, in a voice so sad that its tones ached through my heart. "We are all in His hands. Pray for me, Agnes, that I may have strength. If He does not give me strength, I shall die."

I shivered; for both in voice and look were signs of wavering reason. I tried to comfort her with suggestions as to where Albert might be. "No doubt," I said, "he went home with a friend, and we may look any moment for his return. Why should the absence of a few hours so alarm you?"

There was a stony glare in her eyes as she shook her head silently. She arose, and walking to the window, stood for several minutes looking out upon the snow. I watched her closely. She was motionless as marble. After awhile I saw a quick shudder run through her frame. Then she turned and came slowly back to the lounge from

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which she had risen, and lay down quietly, shutting her eyes. Oh, the still anguish of that pale, pinched face! Shall I ever be able to draw a veil over its image in my mind?

Suddenly she started up. Her ear had caught the sound of the street bell which had just been rung. She went hurriedly to the chamber door, opened it, and stood out in the upper hall, listening.

"Who is it?" she asked, in a hoarse, eager under tone, as a servant came up after answering the bell.

"Mrs. Gordon's man. He called to ask if we'd heard anything from Mr. Albert yet."

Mrs. Martindale came back into her chamber with a whiter face and unsteady steps, not replying. The servant stood looking after her with a countenance in which doubt and pity were mingled; then turned and went down stairs.

I did not go home until evening. All day the snow fell drearily, and the wind sighed and moaned along the streets, or shrieked painfully across sharp angles, or rattled with wild, impatience the loose shutters that obstructed its way. Every hour had its breathless suspense or nervous excitement. Messengers came and went perpetually. As the news of Albert's prolonged absence spread among his friends and the friends of the family, the circle of search and inquiry became larger and the suspense greater. To prevent the almost continual ringing of the bell, it was muffled, and a servant stationed by the door to receive or answer all who came.

Night dropped down, shutting in with a strange suddenness, as some heavier clouds darkened the west. Up to this period not a single item of intelligence from the absent one had been gained since, as related by one of the young Gordons, he parted from him between two and three o'clock in the morning, and saw him take his way down one of the streets, not far from his home, leading to the river. It was snowing fast at the time, and the ground was already well covered. Closer questioning of the young man revealed the fact that Albert Martindale was, at the time, so much intoxicated that he could not walk steadily.

"I looked after him," said Gordon, "as he left me, and saw him stagger from side to side; but in a few moments the snow and darkness hid him from sight. He was not far from home, and would, I had no doubt, find his way there."

Nothing beyond this was ascertained on the first day of his absence. I went home soon after dark, leaving Mrs. Martindale with other friends. The anguish I was suffering no words can tell. Not such anguish as pierced the mother's heart; but, in one degree sharper, in that guilt and responsibility were on my conscience.

Three days went by. He had vanished and left no sign! The whole police of the city sought for him, but in vain. Their theory was that he had missed his home, and wandered on towards the docks, where he had been robbed and murdered and his body cast into the river. He had on his person a valuable gold watch, and a diamond pin worth over two hundred dollars—sufficient temptation for robbery and murder if his unsteady feet had chanced to bear him into that part of the city lying near the river.

All hope of finding Albert alive was abandoned after a week's agonizing suspense, and Mr. Martindale offered a reward of five hundred dollars for the recovery of his son's body. Stimulated by this offer, hundreds of boatmen began the search up and down the rivers and along the shores of the bay, leaving no point unvisited where the body might have been borne by the tides. But over large portions of this field ice had formed on the surface, closing up many small bays and indentations of the land. There were hundreds of places into any one of which the body might have floated, and where it must remain until the warm airs of spring set the water free again. The search was fruitless.

Mrs. Martindale, meantime, had lapsed into a state of dull indifference to everything but her great sorrow. That absorbed her whole mental life. It was the house in which her soul dwelt, the chamber of affliction wherein she lived, and moved, and had her being—so darkly draped that no light came in through the windows. Very still and passionless she sat here, refusing to be comforted.

Forced by duty, yet dreading always to look into her face, that seemed full of accusations, I went often to see my friend. It was very plain that, in her mind, I was an accessory to her son's death. Not after the first few days did I venture to offer a word of comfort; for such words from my lips seemed as mockery. They faltered on my tongue.

One day I called and the servant took up my name. On returning to the parlor, she said that Mrs. Martindale did not feel very well, and wished to be excused. The servant's manner confirmed my instant suspicion. I had looked for this; yet was not the pang it gave me less acute for the anticipation? Was I not the instrumental cause of a great calamity that had wrecked her dearest hope in life? And how could she bear to see my face?

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I went home very heavy-hearted. My husband tried to comfort me with words that had no balm for either his troubled heart or mine. The great fact of our having put the cup of confusion to that young man's lips, and sent him forth at midnight in no condition to find his way home, stood out too sharply defined for any self-delusion.

I did not venture to the house of my friend again. She had dropped a curtain between us, and I said, "It shall be a wall of separation."

Not until spring opened was the body of Albert Martindale recovered. It was found floating in the dock, at the end of the street down which young Gordon saw him go with unsteady steps in the darkness and storm on that night of sorrow. His watch was in his pocket, the hands pointing to half-past two, the time, in all probability, when he fell into the water. The diamond pin was in his scarf, and his pocket-book in his pocket, unrifled. He had not been robbed and murdered. So much was certain. To all it was plain that the bewildered young man, left to himself, had plunged on blindly through the storm, going he knew not whither, until he reached the wharf. The white sheet of snow lying over everything hid from eyes like his the treacherous margin, and he stepped, unheeding, to his death! It was conjectured that his body had floated, by an incoming tide, under the wharf, and that his clothes had caught in the logs and held it there for so long a time.

Certainty is always better than doubt. On the Sunday after the saddest funeral it has ever been my lot to attend, Mrs. Martindale appeared for the first time in church. I did not see her face, for she kept her heavy black veil closely drawn. On the following Sunday she was in the family pew again, but still kept her face hidden. From friends who visited her (I did not call again after my first denial) I learned that she had become calm and resigned.

To one of these friends she said, "It is better that he should have died than live to be what I too sadly fear our good society would have made him—a social burden and disgrace. But custom and example were all against him. It was at the house of one of my oldest and dearest friends that wine enticed him. The sister of my heart put madness in his brain, and then sent him forth to meet a death he had no skill left to avoid."

Oh, how these sentences cut and bruised and pained my heart, already too sore to bear my own thoughts without agony!

What more shall I write? Is not this unadorned story sad enough, and full enough of counsel and warning? Far sooner would I let it sleep, and go farther and farther away into the oblivion of past events; but the times demand a startling cry of warning. And so, out of the dark depths of the saddest experience of my life, I have brought this grief, and shame, and agony to the light, and let it stand shivering in the face of all men.