

A Parent's Feelings

George Gissing

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Mrs. Snickers boasted that she had buried five children, and brought up five more to the age of independence — which, in Boundary Lane, signifies the thirteenth year. Her youngest, a girl of nine, was being prepared for life's responsibilities at a neighbouring Board School. Never having spared the rod, Mrs. Snickers kept an easy conscience with regard to those of her offspring who gave trouble in the outer world. In Boundary Lane, the 'rod' was represented by a broom-handle, an old shoe, a rope-end, a fragment of firewood; in flagrant cases, perchance by the poker. An impertinent doctor, abetted by an officious coroner, had on one occasion caused Mrs. Snickers much pain and inconvenience by remarks upon the death of a child whom she had seen fit to chasten rather severely. It was a ridiculous case, for the mother gave clear evidence that the little girl had been weakly from birth, so how could she be to blame if the child succumbed after a well-merited thrashing? Sue, the latest born, had again and again endured much sterner correction was there not the broken bridge of her nose for evidence? Mrs. Snickers always did feel sorry about that broken nose, which prejudiced her daughter's chances in life; but Sue had been 'that aggravatin',' and as Mrs. Snickers happened to have a cold flat-iron in her hand —

At nine years old, Sue Snickers began to resent the humiliating discipline of school. She by no means deemed herself a child, and was proudly conscious of having learnt many things in the school of life which no professed teacher would ever have imparted to her. She grew daily more impatient for the time of release. Mrs. Snickers, a widow, and forsaken by her other surviving children, looked to the time when Sue's earnings would help to support them both; but the girl had views of her own, and was resolved that the last day of school should likewise be her last in the maternal lodging. London lay about her, with its infinite possibilities; not hers the spirit that could be bounded by Boundary Lane. The long memories of ill-usage rankled in her mind. She hated her mother, and always spoke of her away from home by a very foul name. More than once, of late, she had threatened a suitable revenge for that injury to her face and her fortune. Mrs. Snickers, though still a sturdy woman, did not altogether like the gleam in Sue's eye when she felt it necessary to 'pay' the girl. Sue had discovered a rather effective mode of kicking. Her boots being worn out. at the toes, she used the heel, and had even inserted nails in that part to make a more durable impression.

One of the school teachers was a young woman named Martin; by nature kind, earnest, persevering, not exactly fond of her work in this roughest and vilest of London schools, but resolute to do her duty, and rewarded with a certain measure of success in subduing those children who were by any permitted method subduable. It was impossible for Miss Martin to look upon Sue Snickers as a hopeful subject; she knew the girl to be corrupt, and a source of corruption the efforts of gentleness were to Sue a mere occasion of mockery, and stern treatment had just as little effect upon the child's indurated feelings. Knowing Sue to be a creature of hateful circumstances, the teacher made every allowance for her vicious and insubordinate habits. But it came to pass one day that Miss Martin lost patience, and, for discipline's sake, determined to make an example of Sue, who had behaved outrageously. The cane was brought forth, and Sue, not daring to resist, received one smart cut on each hand.

'Jist wait, that's all,' muttered Sue, when she had returned to her place, howling. 'Jist wait and see, that's all.' And, for the amusement of her neighbours; she exhausted a copious vocabulary in whispered abuse of Miss Martin.

Released at midday, the girl reached Boundary Lane in a few minutes.

'Mother! Teacher 's been beatin' me fair cruel — sure as I stand 'ere — with the cane!' She howled and writhed. 'I ain't a-going to be licked by her. Jist look at my 'ands, they're fair blistered.'

Mrs. Snickers had just come from the public-house, where a misunderstanding with one of her neighbours in the Lane had occupied her for two or three hours. She was flushed, and in a state of nervous tension.

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'Eh! What? Beatin' my child? You come along wi' me. I'll show the ——.'

Hastening away, with volleys of furious and filthy invective, she encountered Mrs. Dubbin, the neighbour with whom she had been quarrelling. At once unkindness was forgotten.

'Ear what my Sue says? The teacher 's been thrashin' her that cruel she can't hardly stand. I'll show the ——.'

In Mrs. Dubbin's eyes there straightway gleamed a sympathetic wrath.

Well! Did you ever! It's time this kind o' thing was put a stop to. I'll come along, an' back you up — s'elp me, I will. We'll show 'em! Think they're going' to wallop our children? Why, if the —— lays a 'and on one o' mine, I'll cut her —— liver out!

With a triumphant yell, Sue ran behind the two women. Other children, scenting sport, turned eagerly back towards the school. As Mrs. Snickers and Mrs. Dubbin ran through the playground, they were accompanied and guided by an uproarious throng.

'Where is she? Let me get at her! Where's the —— as thrashed my child, my Sue?'

Miss Martin was easily discovered; she stood in one of the school-rooms, talking with another teacher. 'That's her, mother!' shrieked Sue. 'Her with the dirty red 'ead!' Before the teachers could understand what was happening, Mrs. Snickers had rushed forward, had seized Miss Martin by the hair, and was avenging Sue with interest. 'I'll pay you, you red-'eaded ——! I'll pay you! I'll teach you to lay your dirty 'and on a child o' mine as has been brought up better than ever you was!' The children led by Sue, shrieked their amusement and approval.

The second teacher had sped for help. She soon returned with the headmaster of the school, a stalwart man, not unused to scenes of this description. He, when he had gripped the yelling fury by the arms, found himself savagely attacked from the rear, his assailant Mrs. Dubbin. In a minute or two the blood was streaming down his cheeks; he had no choice but to fight the two women in earnest, flinging one to the ground, and making the second reel away with a back-hander on the face. When another male teacher came to his assistance, they succeeded, though with no little difficulty, in driving the women off the premises. Poor Miss Martin had been sadly mauled; she sat on the floor, sobbing hysterically. A handful of her hair lay not far off.

A day or two after, Mrs. Snickers and Mrs. Dubbin appeared at the police-court, where, after a vigorous defence by counsel, who dwelt much upon the sacredness of parental feeling, each was fined the sum of five shillings and costs. In anticipation of this judgment, the money had already been subscribed by sympathetic parents in and about Boundary Lane. And that evening, when she came home very late from the public-house, Mrs. Snickers, merely to give vent to her emotions, dragged Sue out of bed and thrashed her unmercifully.

'I'll pay you, my lady! I'll teach you to get your mother summonsed! I'll ——'