Free to read and print. More stories at

gaslight.neocities.org

HOUDINI Magazine
houdinimagazine.com

HOUDINI.TV
houdini-tv.neocities.org

Support Gaslight:
ko-fi.com/A0A81D040N

Rest in Peace Chris // Grim Dark (Half Off) - This Page Dedicated to Your Contributions to the Culture

GASLIGHT

Old Mr. Wiley

By Greye La Spina

WEIRD TALES, MARCH 1951

OLD MR. WILEY

First published: Weird Tales, March 1951.

Cover: Portrait of an Old Man, Hans Memling, 1475, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This story is in the public domain. Copy it, print it, pass it on. More at gaslight.neocities.org.

A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

"Does my boy keep that dog?"

Behind them sounded a low exclamation. At the head of the staircase stood young Frank, the puppy tucked securely under one arm.

"Nobody's going to take away my little dog that Great-grandfather Wiley brought me," cried the lad stoutly, black eyes flashing, thin face determined and unyielding.

"Don't let that dog come near me!" screamed Mrs. Frank and went into a genuine attack of hysteria. "He isn't *real*!"

Doctor Parris exchanged a look with Miss Beaver, whose face was pale but contented.

"I always knew you were psychic," he whispered, brows drawn into a puzzled scowl. "That's how the old gentleman, God rest his wilful soul, could get through."

"I wondered that he never spoke a single word! Now that it's over, I think I'm going to faint," decided Miss Beaver shakily.

"Nonsense," snapped the doctor with scant courtesy. "But *she* is well scared, thank God. I hardly think she will interfere much in future with young Frank. And by the looks of him, the boy's father has had his backbone stiffened considerably."

"That painted dog?" whispered Miss Beaver's tremulous lips.

"Eh? Yes. Ah, yes, the dog," murmured the doctor, too casually.

"You--you--dared!" uttered Miss Beaver incoherently under her breath.

"Not altogether," he protested against her ear.

He pointed upward. Miss Beaver's eyes followed that gesture and met the admonitory, inscrutable, but very gratified pictured eyes of old Mr. Wiley.

■ ■ ■

"He just lies here tossing and moaning until he's so weak that he sinks into a kind of coma," said the boy's father huskily. "There doesn't seem anything particular the matter with him now but weakness. Only," he choked, "that he doesn't care much about getting well."

Miss Beaver kept her eyes on that thin little body outlined by the fine linen sheet. She caught her breath and bit her lower lip to check its trembling. So pitiful, that small scion of a long line of highly placed aristocratic and wealthy forebears, that her cool, capable hand went out involuntarily to soothe the fevered childish brow. She wanted suddenly to gather the little body into her warm arms, against her kind breast. Her emotion, she realized, was far from professional; Frank Wiley IV had somehow laid a finger on her heartstrings.

"If you can rouse him from this lethargy and help him find some interest in living," Frank Wiley III said thickly, "you won't find me unappreciative, Miss Beaver."

The nurse contemplated that small, apathetic patient in silence. Doctor Parris had warned her that unless the boy's interest could somehow be stimulated, the little fellow would die from sheer lack of incentive to live. Her emotion moistened her eyes and constricted her throat muscles. She had to clear her throat before she could speak.

"I can only promise to do my very best for this dear little boy," she said hurriedly. "No human being can do more than his best."

"Doctor Parris tells me you have been uniformly successful with the cases he's put you on. I hope," the young father entreated, "that you'll follow your usual precedent."

"The doctor is too kind," murmured Miss Beaver with slightly lifted brows. "I fear he gives me more credit than I deserve."

"There I hope you're wrong. He calls you an intuitive psychic. It is upon your intuitions that I'm banking now. My affec-

tion hampers me from fathoming Frank's inner-most thoughts. If I were really *sure* what he needed most, I'd get it for him if it were a spotted giraffe," declared his father passionately. "But I'm unable to go deeply enough into his real thoughts."

"If his own father cannot think of something he would care for enough to make him want to live, how can an outsider find out what he might be wanting?" argued the nurse, a touch of resentment in her voice. "Would not his own mother know what would make him want to take hold on life?"

There was an awkward pause.

"His mother," began Frank Wiley III and was interrupted by a light tap on the door panel, at which he went silent, turning away as if relieved to escape any explanation.

The door swung open, permitting the entrance of a young and very pretty woman, one who knew exactly what a charming picture she made in jade negligee over peach pajamas. About her exceedingly well-shaped head ash-blonde hair lay in close artificial waves. She was such a distinctively blonde type that Miss Beaver could not control her slightly startled downward glance at the dark child tossing on the bed. Her upward look of bewilderment was met by Frank Wiley's faint smile.

"He takes after the founder of our family," said he in a low, almost confidential voice. "His great-grandfather was said to have had Indian blood in his veins, as well as a touch of old Spain. The boy doesn't look like his mother or me. He's a real throw-back."

The pretty woman had come across the room, pettishly lifting her silk clad shoulders. Through the straps of embroidered sandals red-tipped toes wriggled. At the tumbled bed and its small restless occupant she threw what appeared to Miss Beaver a distasteful glance, ignoring the nurse entirely although she had not met her previously and must have known that the strange young woman was the new night nurse.

bum page, "has spent a couple of hours with Frankie and me every night since I've been on duty here, and that's *that*!"

"Then that's settled," exclaimed the boy's father in a loud and determined voice. "The dog stays."

As if miraculously restored, Mrs. Frank sprang to her feet.

"Is that *so*? Well, my dear husband, I'm afraid you're sadly mistaken. The dog goes!" She gave her husband glare for glare, the rouge standing in two round spots on her white face.

His look was one of active dislike. "We'll see about that, Florry. All of you, come out into the hall. I want you to see something. Then let anyone say Frank can't keep that dog!"

He beckoned imperatively and they followed down the great staircase into the great hall below, where he stopped under a gilt-framed oil portrait, life size. His finger pointed significantly.

* * *

Miss Beaver deciphered the small label at the front of the massive frame. The painting was a portrait of Frank Wiley I, the founder of the Wiley family. Her eyes rose higher to really look at the picture for the first time since she had been in the house. It was the living likeness of old Mr. Wiley and it almost seemed to her that, as she stared, one of his eyelids quivered slightly as if in recognition of her belated admiration for his diplomatic procedure. Beside him on the painted table one of his fine hands lay negligently or rather, seemed to be lying higher than the table proper, resting on ... was it just bare canvas?

"Look for yourself, Florry! Where is the fox-terrier that was painted sitting on the table under Grandfather's hand?"

Young Mrs. Wiley stared pallidly at the likeness of the founder of the Wiley clan. "White paint," she conjectured. Then, peering closer at the canvas: "Somebody's scraped off the paint where the dog used to be."

Stiff and grim, his own man now, her husband faced her.

gentleman has been in here every night to see Frank since I've been on duty and he brought his little dog, and in my opinion his little dog should get the credit of any improvement in the patient's condition."

Frank Wiley III picked up the bulky volume and began turning the thick cardboard pages. His hands trembled; his face was queerly pasty.

"Turn the pages yourself, nurse, will you? See if you can find old Mr. Wiley's picture."

Miss Beaver flipped the cardboard pages one after another until a familiar face looked quizzically at her from a faded old daguerrotype. She put on finger triumphantly on it.

"Here he is. This is old Mr. Wiley."

Mrs. Frank tiptoed nearer, took a single look, then with a shrill scream fainted into Doctor Parris's convenient arms.

He muttered under his breath: "Superstitious damsel, this." Of Miss Beaver he asked drily as he deposited his fair burden distastefully in the big chair where the old gentleman had been sitting on his nightly visits: "My dear Miss Beaver, are you *very* certain old Mr. Wiley has been dropping in of nights?"

"Of course I am," declared Miss Beaver indignantly. "Is it so astonishing that I recognize a face I've been seeing now for three consecutive nights?"

"This *is* unbelievable," Frank Wiley III gasped.

Said the doctor gravely: "I ask you to be so very certain, nurse, because the original of that picture has been dead for over fifteen years."

As those astonishing words fell on Miss Beaver's ears, she turned from the doctor in sheer resentment.

"I don't care for practical jokes," said she with dignity to the boy's apparently stupefied father, "and I must say I resent being made sport of. I tell you plainly that old Mr. Wiley, the man in this picture," and she tapped her finger impressively on the al-

"Do come to bed, Frank," she urged crossly, placing a proprietary hand on her husband's coat sleeve. "It won't do you any good to moon around in here and it might disturb Francis."

Miss Beaver stood by her patient's bed, her clear gray eyes full upon young Mrs. Wiley. The nurse experienced a kind of disgust, together with one of those uncomfortable intuitions upon the reliability of which Doctor Parris was always depending. She knew, all at once, that Mrs. Wiley was that strange type of modern woman which makes a cult of personal beauty, taking wifehood lightly and submitting to maternity as infrequently as possible.

"I suppose you're right, Florry," the father conceded, with a last solicitous look at the exhausted child. "Miss Beaver...?"

The nurse nodded, her lips a tight red line.

"It would be better for the patient if the room were quiet and darkened," she said with decision.

* * *

When the door had closed behind the pair, Miss Beaver busied herself making the child more comfortable for the night. She smoothed out the cool linen sheets, drawing them taut under the wasted little body. She bathed the hot face with water and alcohol. To all her ministrations the child submitted in a kind of lethargy, speaking no word, making no sign that he had noticed a different attendant. When she had quite finished, he breathed a long sigh of relaxation; his quivering, weak little body went suddenly limp, and Miss Beaver had a good scare as she bent over him, trying to bring back that weary and reluctant spirit to its exhausted mortal domicile.

It was by then nearly half past seven. The child lay supine; heavy-lidded eyes half opened upon this tormentress who had somehow succeeded in calling him back into the dimly lighted room from the shadows of Lethe's alluring banks. Miss Beaver, kneeling beside young Frank's bed, talked tenderly to him in a

soft monotone. She made all manner of gratuitous promises, if only Frank would try like a good boy to get well. She told him firmly that he could, if he wanted to. She made her suggestions with gently persuasive voice, coloring all she said with the warmth of a heart peculiarly open to the unknown needs of the listless child. To those unknown needs she opened wide her spirit, crying within for enlightenment and help.

While she was thus occupied, she became aware of that sensation of being watched that is so startling when one considers oneself alone. Without rising, she turned her face quickly from the pillow of young Frank and looked across the bed. A member of the household about whom Doctor Parris had neglected to tell her was standing there, one finger on his lips which, though firm, wore a reassuring smile that immediately conveyed his warm friendliness. He was a well preserved elderly gentleman of aristocratic mien, clad in a bright blue garment of odd cut, his neck wound about with spotlessly white linen in lieu of a starched collar. His high nose, raised cheek-bones, flashing black eyes and olive skin contrasted in lively fashion with a heavy mane of white hair. His eyes as well as his lips conveyed a kindliness which Miss Beaver's answering smile reciprocated.

Tapping his lips again with admonitory forefinger, the old gentleman now produced, with a broad smile, something from beneath his right arm. Leaning down, he set this carefully beside the listless child. As he put it down, it gave a whining little cry.

Young Frank's eyes widened incredulously. Miss Beaver kept him under intent regard as he turned his dark head on the pillow to see what it was that was sitting on the bed.

"Oh!" he cried in a kind of rapture and put one thin white hand outside the covers to touch the small creature that now stood wagging a brief tail in friendly fashion. "Is it mine?"

"Somebody has meddled with one of our family portraits," he cried with obvious agitation. "It's been damaged...."

"Oh, bother the family portraits!" shrilled his wife, highly exasperated. "Look at the nasty common dog this nurse has let Francis have right in his bed! I never heard of such nerve! Call Mason! Have him put this dog out immediately!"

"I'll take the dog, if it's to be put out," growled Doctor Parris. "I know a good dog when I see one," he muttered resentfully.

"Let *me* see that dog!" exclaimed Frank Wiley III in a strangely grave voice. He pushed the frantically excited Kiki from the bed to the floor. He drew back the cover from the little dog huddled apprehensively against young Frank's thin body. "Oh, good Lord! It's incredible! It just isn't possible!"

"Isn't it?" snapped his wife, looking with distastefully wrinkled nose at her husband's chalky face, wide staring eyes. "Well, here it is and out it goes. Ring for Mason, Frank, at once. I want this dirty little mongrel out!"

* * *

Without paying the slightest attention, her husband turned to Miss Beaver. As he did so, his staring eyes fell upon the ornate plush album on the foot of the bed.

"How did that get here?" he demanded.

"Old Mr. Wiley brought it last night," admitted Miss Beaver, who was feeling a trifle indignant at the old gentleman's defection.

"Old Mr. Wiley?" echoed Doctor Parris; stupidly, for him, Miss Beaver thought. "*Old Mr. Wiley?*"

Frank Wiley III, his voice shaky, almost shouted at her.

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me that old Mr. Wiley was here and brought that album?"

"I may as well tell you now as ever," snapped Miss Beaver and deliberately turned her back upon Mrs. Frank, addressing herself pointedly to Doctor Parris and the boy's father. "The old

but even while she resented this high-handed behavior she was inwardly aware with one of her strong intuitions that old Mr. Wiley knew indubitably what he was about, and that at the psychological moment he would justify her in permitting the dog to remain with young Frank.

She was in no hurry the following morning to turn over her patient to the day nurse and lingered on in the hope that Doctor Parris would appear early enough to get the dog away, as he had half hinted. That he would do his best to make the prescription stick she saw immediately after he took a single look at young Frank who sat up nimbly, his color normal for the first time in weeks. The suppressed excitement in the atmosphere Doctor Parris could hardly be expected to understand until the boy drew back the covers to show the inquisitive black nose and beady eyes hidden beneath.

"Gee, Doctor Parris, isn't he just the cutest dog you ever saw?" chuckled young Frank. "Oh, gosh, here *she* comes!"

The cover was whipped over the dog, whose whimpers subsided with uncommonly good sense. Perhaps young Mrs. Wiley might not have felt the puppy's presence but Kiki's sharp nose was not so easily put upon. Kiki, with a shrill bark, scrambled from her arms and leaped upon the bed where he began scratching furiously at the cover which Frank was holding desperately but vainly against this unexpected onslaught.

"What on earth ..." began his mother, her eyes going from Kiki to Miss Beaver's harried expression. "Oh! A nasty little dog right in Francis's bed! Francis, push it out! It's probably full of fleas. How did that nasty little mongrel get in here?"

"This pup isn't a mongrel, Mrs. Wiley," snapped the doctor. "Anyone can see with half an eye it's a pedigreed animal."

She disregarded him. "Frank! Come here! Nurse, you should have known better than to allow that horrid little mutt...."

Frank Wiley III almost ran into the room, obviously distressed over something quite different from his wife's trouble.

The child looked up at the old gentleman who once more, with serious mien and a significant movement of his head toward the door, gestured for silence. The boy's eyes blinked once or twice; then with a weak but ecstatic smile he laid a pale hand upon the furry coat of the little dog that began to bounce about, licking the hand that caressed it.

Miss Beaver told herself that the old gentleman had found a way to lay hold on young Frank's reluctant spirit. She watched color creep into the boy's face as he cuddled the little dog blissfully, and she drew a deep breath of heart-felt relief when the heavy eyelids drooped and the boy slipped off into a natural sleep, nothing like the heavy coma from which she had struggled so hard to bring him back earlier that night.

She looked up thankfully to meet the understanding gaze of the old gentleman who with that gesture of admonishment bent over and picked up the dog, tucked it under his blue-sleeved arm and went across the room to the door. He did not speak but Miss Beaver received the vivid impression that his visit would be repeated the following night; it was as if her sensitive intuitions could receive and register a wordless message from that other sympathetic soul.

The following morning found the lad refreshed and improved. His first waking thought was for the dog and in reply to his cautiously whispered inquiry Miss Beaver whispered back that his grandfather (the strong family resemblance made her sure it had been the boy's wise grandfather who had found a means of rousing the child from an all-but-fatal lethargy) had taken it with him but would bring it again that night. Miss Beaver wondered at herself for promising this but felt somehow sure that old Mr. Wiley would bring the pup without fail. She believed that she had read indomitable determination in those piercing black eyes; she knew inwardly that he would not rest until he had found that thing which would give young Frank renewed interest in living.

Although the child appeared, if anything, a trifle less apathetic the following day and Miss Beaver felt that each succeeding visit of old Mr. Wiley with the fox-terrier would give the lad another push toward convalescence, yet the nurse did not feel inclined to mention openly that secret visit in the dead of night. The old gentleman's finger tapping his gravely smiling lips was one thing that restrained her; the other was the irritation betrayed, ingenuously enough, by the boy's mother during her early morning visit to the sickroom.

* * *

Young Mrs. Wiley looked especially pretty in a pleated jade sports skirt, a white pullover sweater, a jade beret on her fair hair. Under one arm she carried a small white Pomeranian about whose neck flared a matching wide jade satin bow.

"Well, how is Francis this morning?" she inquired briskly with the determined manner of one dutifully performing an unpleasant task. "He looks better, doesn't he?"

Miss Beaver, to whom this inquiry was addressed, nodded shortly.

The boy did not look at his pretty young mother after his first indifferent glance as she entered the room. He lay in silence with closed eyes and compressed lips, a most unchildlike expression on his thin boyish face.

"Look, Francis! See how sweet Kiki looks with this big green bow!"

Mrs. Wiley dropped the Pomeranian on the bed. The dog snarled and snapped viciously. Frank thrust out one hand and gave the animal a pettish push. Bestowing a hard, cold glare on her son, Mrs. Wiley snatched up the growling dog in high indignation.

"There! I ask you, nurse, if that child isn't just unnatural. I thought boys liked dogs. Francis is queer. I believe he actually hates Kiki." She lifted the dog against her face, permitting it to

one of those huge, plush-covered atrocities with tall ivory letters on the front that proclaimed it to be a Family Album. She surmised that this must be the album which the doctor had said she should look over to note how closely the small boy in the bed resembled his ancestors.

With a light gesture old Mr. Wiley relegated the album to the background, his glance seeking the fox-terrier that still hesitated in the middle of the room. Miss Beaver understood. She gently wakened the small patient, who sat up rubbing sleepy eyes expectantly. The dog, sensing a play-mate, bounded upon the bed and began lapping at Frank's eager fingers with small whimperings.

"He loves me. Don't you, Spot? Look, nurse. He has black spots over his eyes, bigger than I remembered them. And he seems littler tonight, doesn't he? But he knows me. Gee, I wish I could keep him all the time."

Old Mr. Wiley sat silently in a comfortable chair at the shadowy back of the room as he had done on his previous visits but his severe old features softened as he watched the happy child and the antics of the little dog. When at last Frank's eyes grew humid and heavy with sleep, and he began to slip down on his pillow, he clung to his canine playmate, refusing to relinquish the puppy which had cuddled cosily against him.

Old Mr. Wiley's heavy brows lifted into a straight line over his high nose. A grimly ironical smile drew up the corners of his mouth. He made a gesture of resignation. His humorously twinkling eyes met the consternation in Miss Beaver's but he appeared pleased and unmoved at the prospect of the dog's remaining with the boy. He rose from his comfortable chair, drew a deep breath, again touched the admonitory finger to his lips and withdrew, still smiling. The door closed quietly behind his stately blue-clad figure.

Miss Beaver told herself agitatedly that he had no business to throw the onus of the whole situation onto her shoulders;

tle son. Upon Frank Wiley III Miss Beaver felt no reliance could be placed; he was an uxorious weakling. Her unfounded hope rested on old Mr. Wiley alone; old Mr. Wiley whose firm mouth and implacable dark eyes made her feel that he, and he alone, held the key to the situation. That he had realized young Frank's need and had filled it, albeit in secret, gave her to believe that he would also furnish such good reason for yielding to young Frank's boyish yearning as would make Mrs. Frank retire in disorder from any contest of clashing wills.

But when the old gentleman stepped into the room that night he did not carry the little dog under his arm; what he had was something bulkier. He stopped beside the basket which had been sent to Miss Beaver and which she had not yet opened. He leaned down and released the lid. A little fox-terrier jumped out and stood, one small paw upheld, its head cocked to one side.

Miss Beaver drew in a quick gasping breath of admiring amazement at what she realized was the doctor's unusual prescription. If only old Mr. Wiley would stand by, to uphold it, she felt that the boy would recover. She drew his attention with a gesture.

"See how nicely our patient's coming along, Mr. Wiley," she whispered. "Oh, please, won't you make them let him keep the little dog Doctor Parris sent him? You can. I know you can."

* * *

Old Mr. Wiley leaned over the bed, apparently taking pleased note of the faint color on the boy's cheeks. He smiled with obvious satisfaction. He lifted his head, met Miss Beaver's pleading eyes, and nodded emphatically. Then he slackened his hold on whatever he had tucked under one arm and deposited it at the foot of the bed, meeting Miss Beaver's questioning eyes with a significant narrowing of his own. She looked at the thing, then up at him, puzzled. What he had brought in was

loll its pink tongue against her carefully rouged cheek. "Pwecious ... Was it muvver's own pwecious ikkle Kiki? Francis," she addressed her son sharply, "you'll have to get over your nasty ugliness to poor little Kiki. It's a shame, the way you hate dogs!"

"But I don't hate dogs!" cried the boy vehemently, his voice breaking with indignant resentment. "It's just Kiki. I'd love to have a little dog of my very own, Mother. If you'd only let me have a little dog of my very own!" The faint voice died away in a sick wail. The boy's eyelids closed tightly against gushing tears.

Mrs. Wiley gave a short exclamation of impatience.

"Francis has the idea that a dirty mongrel would be nicer than a beautiful pedigreed dog like Kiki," she cried disgustedly.

"But why not try letting him have a dog of his own?" asked Miss Beaver ill-advisedly, her interest getting the better of her. "Perhaps it would give him interest enough ..."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mrs. Wiley sharply. "I won't have street mutts wandering around the house to irritate poor little Kiki. Nasty smelly common mongrels with fleas. Indeed not. I'm surprised at you, nurse, for making the suggestion."

With that, young Mrs. Wiley removed her vivid presence from the room, leaving Miss Beaver shrugging her shoulders and raising her eyebrows. And the little boy crying softly, the sheet pulled over his dark head.

"What's all this, Frankie?" asked the father's voice.

"*She* won't let me have a dog of my own," sobbed the boy, coming out from under the concealing sheet, lips a-quiver, eyes humid.

Miss Beaver's lips compressed. He called his mother "She" as if she were an outsider....

Frank Wiley III stood for a moment looking at his son, then let himself gently down on the edge of the bed, laying one big palm on the little chap's hot forehead. He did not speak, just

sat and stroked the fevered brow with tenderness. On his face a dark look brooded. His eyes were absent, unhappy.

"Daddy, why couldn't I have just a *little* puppy of my own?"

The father replied with obvious effort.

"You know, Frankie, we have one small dog already," said he with forced lightness.

"Oh! Kiki!"

"Couldn't you manage to make friends with Kiki?"

"*She* doesn't really want Kiki to like me, Daddy." (Wise beyond his years, marvelled Miss Beaver.) "Kiki doesn't really like little boys."

"Oh, my God, Frankie, don't go to crying again! Don't you see that Daddy can't quarrel with Mother over a dog? Try to get well, old man, and we'll see then what we can do. How about a pony, son?"

The little boy disappeared under the sheet, refusing to reply. Miss Beaver could not bear his convulsive, hardly-controlled sobs, and turned an accusing face upon Frank Wiley III.

"Is it possible," she asked icily, "that Frank's mother would actually refuse him so small a thing as a puppy, if it meant the merest chance of his getting better?"

The face turned to hers was gloomy, the voice impatient.

"Oh, good God! Was ever a man in such a damnable situation? My dear Miss Beaver, ask the doctor to tell you how much influence I have in this household, before you blame me for not taking a firm stand with a woman as nervous and temperamental as Mrs. Wiley. I'd give my life willingly to bring my boy back to health but unhappily I'm not like the founders of our family. Some day I'll show you our family album. You'll find it easy to trace the strong resemblance Frankie has to his forebears. Its the damnably high spirit he gets from them that is so stubbornly killing him now."

* * *

making Miss Beaver's heart ache with his childish apology, "not that I want you to leave, you know."

"That will be for the doctor to decide, Frank. But the more you eat and sleep and grow happy in your heart, the faster you'll get well," advised Miss Beaver earnestly.

For a long happy hour young Frank fraternized with the fox-terrier while the old gentleman sat silently observing him, a grimly humorous smile hovering about his firm lips. Then the boy's eyes began to cloud sleepily and much to Miss Beaver's surprise and pleasure Frank relinquished his canine playmate and fell asleep, a blissful smile curving his childish mouth as he breathed with soft regularity.

Then old Mr. Wiley picked up the puppy, tucked it under one blue-clad arm and again admonishing Miss Beaver with a finger athwart his lips, tiptoed from the room, closing the door behind very gently.

The nurse thought with a sigh of relief that the old gentleman had looked both pleased and gratified. She herself could hardly wait for morning, and for the day to pass, and was both pleased and encouraged herself when she went on duty the next night. Frank had asked to sit up for supper and when Miss Beaver entered the room he manfully refused the day nurse's assistance back to bed. The day nurse's up-lifted brows betrayed her astonishment at the sudden turn for the better the young patient had taken.

"I'm almost well," piped up Frank Wiley IV, the moment the door closed behind the day nurse. "Tomorrow, the doctor says, I can sit out in the garden in the sun. Couldn't I have Spot then?"

"You just leave that to me," said Miss Beaver determinedly. "I may have much to say about your keeping Spot, Frank."

In her heart she was in reality panic-stricken for she knew that pretty Mrs. Wiley would indifferently laugh off the idea that ownership of a dog could mean returned health to her lit-

* * *

The doctor suddenly spoke close to her ear, an odd note in his voice. "I'm going to prescribe something very unusual, nurse. Tomorrow night a covered basket will be delivered here for you. Take it into the boy's room and open it if he wakens during the night. Understand?"

"I can't say I do, Dr. Parris."

"You will," he promised. "I'll take that basket and its contents when I come around for my morning call. Unless," he told her grimly, "I can see my way to make the prescription stick."

It was with the utmost anxiety that Miss Beaver awaited the coming that night of old Mr. Wiley. The day nurse had told her that Frank had eaten a good lunch and what for him was a hearty supper. He had agreed to sleep if he were awakened the moment Spot arrived, and Miss Beaver had accepted his whispered offer. To her relief, he fell asleep immediately, natural color on his thin cheeks.

Mr. Wiley's light tap came on the door panel. She met his grave smile with a soft exclamation of welcome. The small dog was tucked under one arm and he paused to warn her with that admonitory touch of one finger to his lips that the secret of his visits must be preserved. She nodded comprehension, leaned over the sleeping boy and whispered softly in his ear.

He stirred, opened drowsy eyes. Then he pulled himself up on his pillow, reaching thin hands out to the spotted dog which nipped playfully at him.

"Isn't he wonderful? When may I have him all the time?"

"When you're well and don't need a night nurse," promised Miss Beaver rashly and was rewarded by a broad smile from the courtly old gentleman who tipped back his white-maned head and laughed silently but whole-heartedly.

"I'll get well at once, nurse. Don't you think I might be well enough tomorrow? Or the day after? Not," he added politely,

He rose, wheeled about and went to the door. Paused. Still with that brooding dark look on his face he turned to her again.

"If my death would make it any easier for Frank, I wouldn't hesitate a moment. I'm a failure. It wouldn't matter. But I feel that by living and watching over him I'm standing between my boy's development as an individual, and the subtlest, softest peril that could possibly threaten him. I would rather he died, if he cannot bring about what he wills for his own development. As for me, I ... I am a dead man walking futilely among the living."

With that, he swung out of the room.

Miss Beaver knelt by the boy's bed, murmuring persuasively to him as she strove to make him check his hysterical sobs.

"Frankie, you really must stop crying. You're too big a chap to cry and it only makes you worse. If you're a good boy to-day and eat your food, I'll let your grandfather bring the little dog tonight," she promised rashly.

The sheet turned down and Frank's reddened face peered at her plaintively.

"That was my *great*-grandfather," he assured her gravely.

"Well, great or great-great, it's all the same," she conceded good-humoredly.

"Do you really think he'll bring Spot tonight?"

"Of course he will. But you must eat your meals, take a long nap, and stop crying."

"Oh, I promise!" the boy cried eagerly.

The day, Miss Beaver was told later, was uneventful. She had remained with the day nurse until Doctor Parris had made his visit. The doctor had been much pleased to find his small patient in good spirits and congratulated himself upon having put Miss Beaver on the case.

"If our young friend continues to improve like this, Miss Beaver," he joked, "we'll have him playing football within a month." He lowered his voice for her ear only. "Has anything

particular come under your notice that might account for this agreeable change?"

Miss Beaver's forehead wrinkled slightly. She regarded the doctor from narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

"Tell me, Doctor Parris, if it isn't asking too much, why Mr. Wiley is a Man-Afraid-of-his-Wife?"

The doctor could not repress an involuntary chuckle.

"Come now, nurse, don't you think you're asking rather a good deal?"

"No, I don't," retorted Miss Beaver shortly. "Nor do you think so, either. What I'm trying to get at is, why Mr. Wiley lets Mrs. Wiley prevent him from giving Frank a puppy that he wants?"

The doctor regarded her thoughtfully.

"So it's a pup the boy wants. Ha, hum!" he uttered.

"I'm asking you," she repeated impatiently.

"Oh! Eh! Well! Mrs. Wiley, you have undoubtedly discerned, is one of those self-centered egotists who simply cannot permit people to live any way but her way. She won't have another dog in the house because it might interfere with the comfort of that silly damn--excuse me--Pom of hers. If Frank were a bit older and could feign a penchant for the Pom and his mother got the idea that the animal's affection might be alienated from her, she would at once get the child another dog, just to keep him away from Kiki."

"All of which sounds subtle but isn't very helpful," decided Miss Beaver with unflattering directness. "I've told Mr. Wiley that I thought a dog might interest his son and Mr. Wiley replies that his wife won't let him get one. There is something more behind this and it's obvious you don't want to tell me."

"Oh, hang it, nurse! You always manage to get your own way with me, don't you? I'll probably have to marry you one of these days, so I can keep the upper hand," he grinned. "Well, then, Wiley is a weak sister and oughtn't to be. He's completely under his chorus-girl wife's thumb. He lost a good bit in Wall

Street and what's left is in her name, so he's got to watch his step until he's recouped his losses.

"If he were like his father or his grandfather ... but he isn't," snapped the doctor vexedly. "Now, this boy here, he's a throwback, young Frank is. He's the spittin' image of the founder of the family and I'm willing to wager he's got the grit and determination that once endowed old Frank Wiley I."

"I've observed," murmured Miss Beaver, "that you and his father call the boy Frank, while his mother refers to him as Francis."

"That's her hifalutin way of putting on the dog, nurse," Doctor Parris grinned wickedly. "His name on the birth certificate is Frank but she'd make a girlish Francis of him if she had her own way. For some reason she isn't getting it. Her husband sticks to the old family name of Frank and the boy won't answer to Francis.

"She has a healthy respect for the first old Frank Wiley. If you were to see the family album, nurse, you'd be quick to catch the look in the old boy's eyes. Nobody ever put anything over on that lad, believe me."

"I've no doubt of that," thought Miss Beaver to herself, the indomitable countenance of her midnight visitor clear before her mind's eye. It was astonishing, that strong family resemblance. Aloud she snapped: "Family album, indeed! What I'm after is to get permission for this child to have a pet. I'm positive it would make all the difference in the world to him."

"You won't get permission, nurse. Mrs. Frank won't have any other pets around to bother precious Kiki," he said grimly.

"Not if it's a matter of life or death?" she persisted.

"She would laugh at your putting it just that way," growled the doctor, an absent expression stealing over his kindly face.

"Well, we'll see what we'll see," observed Miss Beaver cryptically, her mouth an ominous tight red line.