

The Well-off Kid

Two new patients were admitted to the Children's Ward of the General Hospital that morning. One was called Harry, and the other Hilary.

Harry was carried in on a stretcher, covered with a grey blanket, and a large hot-water bottle at his feet. Along with him came his elder brother, Eric, a boy of ten, to see young Harry safely handed over and all particulars taken down.

The patient, who was seven, was wearing patched flannel trousers and a green cotton jersey. He was removed from the stretcher as he was and gently slipped into bed between two blankets, until the doctor had examined him. Nurse Broyce took his pulse and temperature, and then Eric told her the name and address, and gave a brief account of the accident. They had been playing football in the street, and in a furious attempt to save a goal, Harry had either run into a car or the car had run into him.

Harry himself, a little scratched and bruised, said nothing until his brother was leaving, then he suddenly sat up and piped out: "There ain't nothin' wrong with me!"

"I'm sure there isn't," said Nurse Broyce, "but they won't take our word. You'll have to let the doctor see you."

Again he called out, as Eric was waving to him from the door, "Don't forget to tell Mum, tell her there ain't a bally thing wrong with me. Say they just brought me in for a rest."

At that moment the doctor arrived. "There won't be much resting for you, young man," he said. "These nurses need someone to help serve the food."

"I'm willin'," said Harry, looking round and grinning.

It was then the second patient came in.

Hilary entered the ward accompanied by his parents, after a delayed farewell to his two aunts at the door. His father carried a pile of toys and books for the boy's amusement. The operation he had come to have was a simple one. His ears stuck out—commonly known as 'bat ears'—and in a week or so he would be going out with them pressed neatly to the sides of his head. His mother and a nurse took him to the bathroom to change, and he was settled into a bed next to Harry.

But as his parents were leaving he suddenly set up a howl, and it was all the father could do to restrain the mother from taking him home again, or having him removed to a private ward. But finally the door closed on the parents, and after a time the ward settled down.

"Those two, Hilary and Harry," remarked Nurse Smith to Nurse Broyce that evening, "are the same age to the very day. But in every other way they seem as unlike each other as two kids could be."

Harry had short hair, wiry and black, while Hilary had blond, wavy locks. Harry's small, eager eyes were watching all that was going on, while Hilary's large, unhappy eyes stared at the ceiling.

"Well, Hilary," said Nurse Broyce, "I think we'd better be putting your books and toys away. Would you like something to read before 'lights out'?"

Hilary shook his head and whispered, "No, thank you, Nurse."

She turned to Harry. "Now what have you got there, Harry?" she asked.

Harry produced his only toy. "It's my rabbit's foot, Nurse," he said. "It don't half bring me luck."

"You'll need it," she said, "if you keep on playing football in the street."

"Naughty, wasn't I?" said Harry.

A whimper was heard from the next bed. Harry turned to him. "Just think of the fun we'll have if they keep us here till Christmas."

"Christmas!" exclaimed Hilary in a shocked whisper.

"So long!"

"You never know your luck," said Harry. "My Eric was in hospital one Christmas—told us all how smashin' it was."

"Have you any brothers, Hilary?" asked Nurse Broyce.

"No, Nurse," said Hilary, "there's only me."

"I've three brothers," said Harry, then added, "and one sister. 'Course I ain't seen her yet—my sister."

"Oh," Nurse Broyce tucked him in. "And how's that, Harry?"

"Because she ain't been born yet," said Harry.

At this piece of news even Hilary sat up and took notice.

"But you can't know whether you've a sister or not," he said, "until she's born."

"My mum," said Harry firmly, "has promised us a sister. She's going to have a baby any day now."

"But that doesn't follow that it will be a sister," said Hilary. "Does it, Nurse?"

Harry didn't wait for the Nurse's opinion. "When my mum promises us something," he said, "she sees we get it. So I've got three brothers, and a sister to come. Got me?"

Hilary hesitated. "Oh, I see," he said. "Uh, good night."

"Good night, mate. Good night, Nurse."

"Good night, Nurse," said Hilary. Something about Harry seemed to have infected him, and he was already settling in.

Harry's diagnosis of himself proved quite sound. In three days his bruises were out and his scratches healing, and he was ready for discharge. He was serving the morning milk drinks in the ward, and waiting for some one to collect him, when Eric arrived.

"Mum was sorry she couldn't come, Nurse," said Eric, "so she asked me to thank you for all you'd done. She had a baby last night."

"Well, how nice," said the Nurse. "And is everybody well?"

"Oh, fine," said Eric. "Lovely baby, weighs—"

Hilary called out excitedly: "What is it—boy or a girl?"

"Why," said Eric, "it's a boy."

"What did I tell you, Harry?" called out Hilary. "Just because your mother promised you a sister it didn't mean you would have one."

At that moment Nurse Broyce felt very sorry for Harry. But it was clear that Harry didn't feel sorry for himself. He went across to Hilary's bed and smiled at him.

"It don't have to be this time, Hilary," he said. "My mum's promised us a sister— she'll see we get one." His tone carried utter conviction. "So now I've four brothers, and a sister to come." He put out his hand, and the two boys shook hands. "I reckon them ears'll look a treat when they take them bandages off, mate. I'll have to come in one day an' have mine done. So long, Hilary. Good luck. Good-bye, everybody, good-bye."

Nurse Broyce saw Harry out to the steps, and kissed him good-bye. On her way back she met Nurse Smith, who was just coming on duty after a day off.

"Young Harry just left," she said.

"Harry?" said Nurse Smith. "Was Harry the well-off kid?"

Nurse Broyce thought for a moment. "Yes," she said, "Harry was well off."

As Nurse Smith opened the ward door she saw Hilary sitting up wiping his eyes. She turned to Nurse Broyce. "Hy, Broyce, I thought you said that the well-off kid had left!"

"He has," said Nurse Broyce. "I mean young Harry."

"Do you call him well off?" said Nurse Smith.

"Yes, I do," said Nurse Broyce. "He came in here full of cheer and good faith, and he spread them all around the place. Those are things money can't buy. And if young Harry isn't well off, nobody ever was!"

And with that she went across to the empty bed, whipped off the sheets and blankets, and began to prepare it for the next patient.