

Mary Roberts Rinehart



GRANDFATHER
BIBBY,
NURSE

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Title: Grandfather Bixby, Nurse

Date of first publication: 1910

Author: Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958)

Date first posted: September 30, 2022

Date last updated: September 30, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220969

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GRANDFATHER BIXBY, NURSE

By Mary Roberts Rinehart

Author of "Seven Days," "The Man in Lower Ten," etc.

"“THE coast is clear,” ” read Grandfather Bixby drowsily. “““ Send two trusty scouts to the cave—” ” ”

“Grandpa,” said the little boy on the bed, suddenly, “what did you have for dinner?”

““—and roll the casks of provisions beyond reach of the waves.” A brushwood fire was soon burning, and from it proceeded an appetizing odor of broiling fish. The castaways——’ ”

“Grandpa!” The boy’s tone was more insistent. “What *did* you have for dinner?”

Grandfather Bixby was wide awake now.

“Dinner!” he exclaimed, as if he heard for the first time. He was thinking hard. “Why, nothing much, Dicky. Meat and potatoes—I forget what else.”

“It smelled like chocolate pudding,” said Dicky wistfully. “And when Norah came up to sit with me while you were at dinner, she said it was chocolate pudding.”

“Norah’s a fool,” snapped Grandfather Bixby, putting down his glasses irritably. “There may have been pudding, but it wasn’t good pudding, I can tell you that.”

“It doesn’t have to be very good for me to like it. Grandpa, were you ever sick on the Fourth of July?”

“Never was well,” maintained the old gentleman stoutly. “Seems to me, when I look back, I ’most always had the mumps or the measles or something. I was a regular Fourth of July croaker.”

Dicky eyed his grandfather suspiciously, but the wrinkled face above the gray dressing-gown was entirely serious. Indeed, Grandfather Bixby, embarking on a sea of mendacity, felt to the full the inexpertness which resulted from seventy years of honesty. To cover his confusion, he rearranged with care the huge American flag that had been draped over the foot of the sick-bed, and stepped back to inspect the result.

“I tell you, it’s fine, Dicky,” he said. “What with that string of fire-crackers across the foot of the bed, and the flag, and a Roman candle at every corner, you look like a regiment going into action.”

“Like a battle-ship,” the child supplemented gleefully. “Like father’s ship. You’re the Admiral, and I’m the Captain. Last Fourth of July father took me to the park, and a rocket-stick came down—biff!—and made a hole in his hat and cut his head a little. Do you remember? And how mother was so scared—for him, you know—that she cried? Grandpa, *when* is my father coming back?”

Grandfather Bixby busied himself at the window, without answering. When the child repeated the question, however, he turned around as if he had just heard.

“Your father?” he repeated to gain time. “Why, he’ll be back some time, Dicky. You settle down now; your mother won’t let me look after you again if you don’t keep quiet.”

“But Norah says he won’t be back,” Dicky persisted. “She said I had lost the best father in the world. My feet got all cold, and I said, ‘Was he killed in a battle?’ and she said, ‘No, he wasn’t dead, and such a fine-looking young man, too.’ ”

He stopped, out of breath, and, fortunately for the old man’s twitching face, his attention was at that moment distracted. Grandfather Bixby had taken a covered jelly-glass from a tin pail of

ice on the window-sill, and held it up for the youngster's eyes to feast on.

"Ice-cream!" he exclaimed, looking around over his glasses for a spoon. "A present from the drug-store man at the corner. He said he missed his best customer." He pulled a chair beside the bed and slipped a pillow under Dicky's head. "I reckon your mother and the doctor wouldn't object to a little ice-cream."

The first spoonful, guided by his shaking old hand, missed the boy's open mouth and slid into the hollow of his neck, to be mopped up by Grandfather Bixby's pipe-scented handkerchief. The next half-dozen reached their proper destination in short order; then Dicky turned away his head.

"I can't chew it," he explained in a thin but polite voice. "When I shut my teeth it isn't there. If father was here, he would make that old doctor give me something to eat. Everybody does what father says—but mother. She's allowed to do what she likes."

The old man scraped down the cream from the sides of the glass, and his corded fingers were tremulous.

"I guess that's it, Dicky boy," he said. "Your mother's always been allowed to do what she likes, and that isn't good for anybody. Not that it has spoiled her," he supplemented, with hasty loyalty.

The white china clock with the blue windmills on it ticked away cheerfully on the mantel; beside it stood a small locomotive, a wooden mule, and a life-like cow, with a space in her back that lifted out and allowed milk to be poured in, to be milked out later into diminutive pails. And in a silver frame, surmounted by a blue paper rose which Dicky had made at Kindergarten, was the picture of a young man in a uniform.

Grandfather Bixby stirred the ice-cream into a slushy mass, and looked at the picture. He had never had a son, and this tall young navy officer had been very dear to him. And now he was on the

high seas and Helen would not speak of him, although she left his picture in the nursery—for Dicky.

The clock ticked on, and Grandfather Bixby's head drooped on his breast. Then—

“They said perhaps I might have toast to-morrow,” came Dicky's voice. “It's almost to-morrow now, or it will be in three hours.”

“Three hours and fifteen minutes,” said Grandfather Bixby, looking at the clock. “What would your mother say, if she came home and found crumbs in the bed, and your temperature up in the end of the thermometer again?”

“Just a little piece!”

“Ice-cream and toast, and you with nothing but beef tea for six weeks!” But he was plainly wavering. The boy pursued his advantage ruthlessly.

“When you were sick,” he pleaded, “didn't I bring you the paper every morning? When you weren't allowed to read?”

Grandfather Bixby looked around him helplessly: then he got up and tied the cord of his dressing-gown.

“You know what your mother would say. I would never hear the end of it,” he protested. “Where do they keep the bread?”

After he had gone down the stairs, Dicky lay back with a contented sigh. The window was open, and often there darted across the black emptiness of the night outside a weird streak of golden fire—the stem of some vast glittering plant whose flowering blossom of red and green lights was beyond and above the boy's vision. Now and then, however, one of the fiery petals dropped lower than its fellows, and, swaying with the air, fell slowly, slowly, past.

The smaller noises of the day were gone: only an occasional swish and the soft loom of a bursting rocket remained. And up the stairs from the kitchen came the odor of toasting bread. There was a clatter of dishes, too, as if Grandfather Bixby might be hunting the butter. And then—there was an unmistakable smell of something scorching.

It was some time before the old man came slowly up again. He carried triumphantly before him a plate on which lay a slice of toast. His furrowed cheeks were rosy with the heat of the stove, and he glistened with butter in unexpected spots.

“The way of the transgressor is hard, Dicky,” he said. “I will have to see Norah about the kitchen. I’m afraid I have left it upset—very much upset indeed.”

Dicky ate the toast slowly, discriminatingly, taking very small bites and making them last as long as possible. Never had he dreamed of anything so delectable, so ambrosial; even the slight flavor of scorching seemed to add to its richness. And, watching him, some of the anxiety faded from Grandfather Bixby’s face.

“If his temperature *should* go up,” he was arguing to himself, “goodness knows there has been enough noise to-day to do it! That mite of toast wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

Nevertheless, he was relieved when, with all Dicky’s parsimony, that last bite was gone. With the empty plate in his hand, he wandered around, looking for some out-of-the-way place where it might pass unnoticed until morning.

“Times change, Dicky,” he reflected aloud. “Here am I, who used to punish that mother of yours when she was a little girl—here am I, scared to death for fear she’ll come back and scold me.”

“Did she cry when you walloped her?” Dicky asked, with interest. “Where was I, those days?”

“You were in heaven with the angels.” The old man was somewhat out of his depth. “You—you were pluming your little white wings, so when the time came you could fly straight down to earth.”

Dicky sat up, wide-eyed and shaky.

“Then the doctor told me a whopper,” he asserted. “*He* said I grew in a hollow stump, and he carried me here in a satchel.”

Grandfather Bixby was slightly confused: he paused before the window with the plate in his hand. Had he raised his eyes, he would have seen a man, a tall young man in a boyish soft hat, who was standing across the street, looking eagerly over. At sight of Grandfather Bixby’s thin old figure and black skull-cap, the stranger’s eyes softened wonderfully. He even took a step forward; then he stopped, and drew himself up.

Grandfather Bixby reached out with the plate; it had just occurred to him that no one would see it if he put it on the sill. Just how it slipped he did not know, but it did, and fell with the peculiar silvery crash of the best china to the walk below. Not only that, but it carried down with it the medicine bottle, left there for coolness.

“The way of the transgressor is hard,” repeated Grandfather Bixby, staring ruefully at the empty sill. “I—I don’t know what we will do now. There went your medicine.”

Dicky was not interested. The slice of toast had generated many foot-pounds of energy, and he had secured one of the Roman candles from the bed-post. He held it up in his thin arms and squinted along it. There was a fuse—oh, it was complete, all but the match, and there were even matches on the bedside table. It is a terrible and lonesome thing to pass a Fourth of July without a fire-cracker or a Roman candle.

Shortly after, the watcher across the street saw the light go down in the sick-room, and a stealthy old gentleman in slippers come out the door and hurry toward the corner drug-store. The young man

meant to go away, but there was something about the house across—the house which he had vowed never to enter again—there was something that seemed to hold him. And then—there were strange splutterings and muffled explosions from somewhere. If he hadn't known that Helen was with the boy, he would have said that some one was putting off fire-crackers up there.

At that moment, from between the rose-pink curtains sailed a vivid yellow ball of fire. It hung for a second over the quiet street and then fell slowly, dying into a gilded spark. It was followed by another, and yet others, bursting softly from their chrysalis beyond the curtains, speeding out to form a short-lived constellation in the night. The last golden sphere went awry, and lodged in the soft draperies: the gold became red, a thin circle of fire that spread and smoked. With a queer sound, an oath that sounded like a sob, the watcher ran across the street and into the house he had vowed never to enter again.

A young woman with a wistful mouth, something like Dicky's, turned the corner and came up the street. A fleck of yellow fire was dying in the gutter, but she did not notice it, and up above the red circle had faded away. Only a futile spark sped starward to die with myriads of its brothers in the summer sky.

Grandfather Bixby came quickly down the street. It had taken some time, but he had hoped Helen was not home yet. He tip-toed in and went very softly up the stairs, to stand dumbfounded in the nursery door.

First of all, the white quilt was covered with brown singed places and scraps of red paper, and all that was left of the rose-pink curtains lay smoking on the hearth. In a big chair sat a young man, with Dicky, in a blanket, on his lap, and on her knees beside the two, with her arms as nearly as possible around them both, was Helen! Helen!

In that moment Grandfather Bixby forgot the ice-cream, the toast, the broken plate, and the spilled medicine. The other things, being a wise man, he ignored.

“That’s it! That’s it!” he snorted with rampant virtue, from the doorway. “After I spend the whole evening trying to keep that youngster quiet, you two young idiots do your best to put him on his back again.”

Some time after he had closed the door, Dicky raised a drowsy head and interrupted the whisperings of the other two members of the little group.

“What’s that?” he asked thickly. From below came stealthily the clinking of broken china on a pan and the cautious swish of a broom. His father only drew him closer, and, leaning across, kissed the young woman on the mouth that was like Dicky’s.

“For all I care,” he said, “it might be Grandfather Bixby sweeping up the best china.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Story was published in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine Vol. 86, July 1910 issue.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Grandfather Bixby, Nurse* by Mary Roberts Rinehart.]