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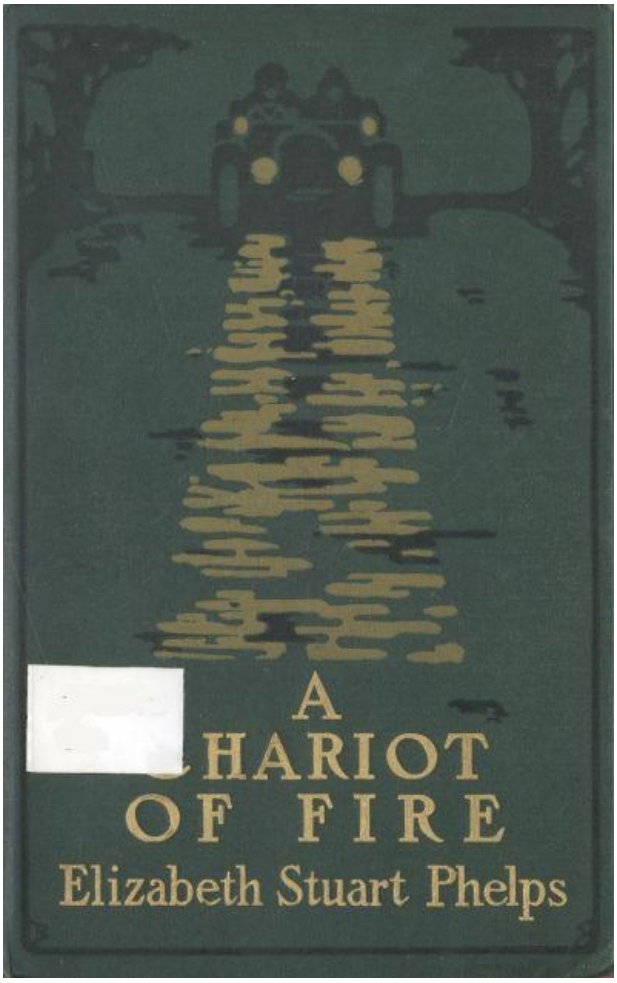

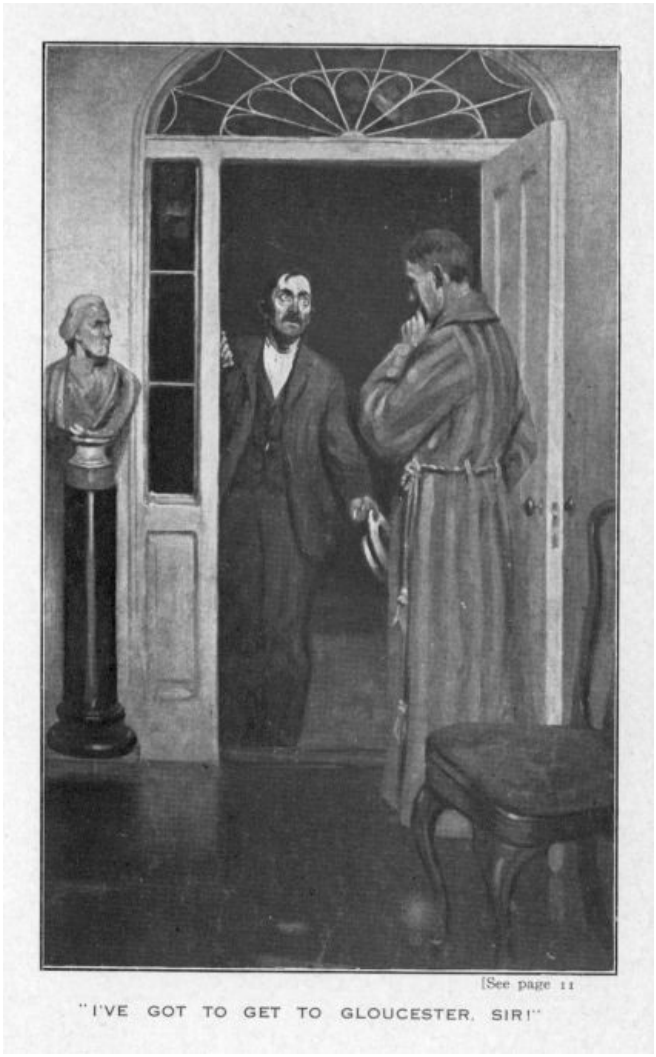

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"I'VE GOT TO GET TO GLOUCESTER, SIR!"

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A CHARIOT OF FIRE

BY

ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

ILLUSTRATED

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ILLUSTRATIONS

A CHARIOT OF FIRE

When the White Mountain express to Boston stopped at Beverly, it slowed op reluctantly, crashed off the baggage, and dashed on with the nervousness of a train that is unmercifully and unpardonably late.

It was a September night, and the channel of home-bound summer travel was clogged and heaving.

A middle-aged man—a plain fellow, who was one of the Beverly passengers—stood for a moment staring at the tracks. The danger-light from the rear of the onrushing train wavered before his eyes, and looked like a splash of blood that was slowly wiped out by the night. It was foggy, and the atmosphere clung like a sponge.

"No," he muttered, "it's the other way. Batty's the other way."

He turned, facing towards the branch road which carries the great current of North Shore life.

"How soon can I get to Gloucester?" he demanded of one who brushed against him heavily. He who answered proved to be of the baggage staff, and was at that moment skilfully combining a frown and a whistle behind a towering truck; from this two trunks and a dress-suit case threatened to tumble on a bull-terrier leashed to something invisible, and yelping in the darkness behind.

"Lord! This makes 'leven dogs, cats to burn, twenty-one baby-carriages, and a guinea-pig travellin' over this blamed road since yesterday—What's that? *Gloucester?*—6.45 to-morrow morning."

"Oh, but look here!" cried the plain passenger, "that won't do. I have got to get to Gloucester *to-night*."

"So's this bull-terrier," groaned the baggage-handler. "He got switched off without his folks—and I've got a pet lamb in the baggage-room bleatin' at the corporation since dinner-time. Some galoot forgot the crittur. There's a lost parrot settin' alongside that swears in several foreign languages. I wish to Moses I could!"

The passenger experienced the dull surprise of one in acute calamity who wonders that another man can jest. He turned without remark, and went to the waiting-room; he limped a little, for he was slightly lame. The ticket-master was locking the door of the office, and looked sleepy and fagged.

"Where's the train to Gloucester?"

"Gone."

"'Tain't *gone*?"

"Gone half an hour ago."

The official pointed to the clock, on whose face an ominous expression seemed to rest, and whose hands marked the hour of half-past twelve.

"But I have got to get to Gloucester!" answered the White Mountain passenger. "We had an accident. We're late. I ain't much used to travellin'—I supposed they'd wait for us. I tell you I've got to get there!"

In his agitation he gripped the arm of the other, who threw the grasp off instinctively.

"You'll have to walk, then. You can't get anything now till the newspaper train."

"God!" gasped the belated passenger. "I've got a little boy. He's dying."

"Sho!" said the ticket-master. "That's too bad. Can you afford a team? You might try the stables. There's one or two around here."

The ticket-master locked the doors of the station and walked away, but did not go far. A humane uneasiness disturbed him, and he returned to see if he could be of any use to the afflicted passenger.

"I'll show you the way to the nearest," he began, kindly.

But the man had gone.

In the now dimly lighted town square he was, in fact, zigzagging about alone, with the loping gait of a lame man in a feverish hurry.

"There must be hosses," he muttered, "and places. Why, yes. Here's one, first thing."

Into the livery-stable he entered so heavily that he seemed to fall in. His cheap straw hat was pushed back from his head; he was flushed, and his eyes were too bright; his hair, which was red and coarse, lay matted on his forehead.

"I want a team," he began, on a high, sharp key. "I've got to get to Gloucester. The train's gone."

A sleepy groom, who scowled at him, turned on a suspicious heel. "You're drunk. It's fourteen miles. It would cost you more'n you're worth."

"I've got a little boy," repeated the lame man. "He's dying."

The groom wheeled back. "That so? Why, that's a pity. I'd like to 'commodate you. See? I'm here alone—see? I darsen't go so far without orders. Boss is home and abed."

"He got hurt in an accident," pleaded the father. "I come from up to Conway. I went to bury my uncle. They sent me a telegraph about my little boy. I ain't drunk. They sent me the telegraph. I've got to get home."

"I'll let you sleep here along of me," suggested the groom, "but I daresn't leave. I'm responsible to the boss. There's other places you might get one. I'll show you. See? I'd try 'em all if I was you."

But again the man was gone.

By the time he had found another stable his manner had changed; he had become deprecating, servile. He entreated, he trembled; he flung his emergency at the feet of the watchman; he reiterated his phrase:

"I've got a little boy, if you please. He's dying. I've got to get to Gloucester—I live in Squam."

"I don't like to refuse you," protested the night-watchman, "but two of my horses are lame, and one is plumb used up carrying summer folks. I'm dreadful short. I haven't a team to my name I could put on the road to Gloucester. It's—why, to Squam it's seventeen miles—thirty-four the round trip. It would cost you—"

"I'll pay!" cried the lame man; "I'll pay. I ain't beggin'."

"I'm sorry I haven't got a horse," apologized the watchman. "It would cost you ten dollars if I had. But I hain't."

"Ten *doll*ars?" The traveller echoed the words stupidly.

"I'm sorry; fact, I am," urged the watchman. "Won't you set 'n' rest a spell?"

But the visitor had vanished from the office.

Twenty minutes after, the door-bell of a home in the old residence portion of the town rang

violently and pealed through the sleeping house.

It was a comfortable, not a new-fashioned, house, sometimes leased to summer citizens, and modernized in a measure for their convenience; one of the few of its kind within reach of the station, and by no means near.

When the master of the family had turned on all the burglar electricity and could get the screen up, he put his head out of the window, and so perceived on his door-step a huddled figure with a white, uplifted face.

A shaking voice came up:

"Sir? Be you a gentleman?"

"I hope so," went down the quiet reply. "But I can't remember that I was ever asked that question at this time of morning before."

"Be you a Christian?" insisted the voice from below.

"Sometimes—perhaps," went down the voice from above.

The voice from below came up: "Sir! Sir! I'm in great trouble. For the love of Christ, sir, come down, quick!"

"Why, of course," said the voice from above.

The man stood quite still when the great bolts of the door shot through their grooves. Against a background of electric brilliance he saw a gentleman in pajamas and bathrobe, with slippers as soft as a lady's on his white feet. The face of the gentleman was somewhat fixed and guarded; his features were carefully cut, behind their heavy coat of seaside tan.

"Well," he said, "that was a pretty solemn adjuration. What is it?"

"I want to get a team," stammered the figure on the steps. Suddenly, somehow, his courage had begun to falter. He felt the enormity of his intrusion. He came up against the mystery of social distinctions; his great human emergency seemed to be distanced by the little thing men call difference of class.

"You want—to get—a team?" repeated the gentleman; he spoke slowly, without irritation. "You have made a mistake. This is not a livery-stable."

"Livery-stable!" cried the intruder, with a swift and painful passion. "I've tried three! Fust one hadn't any boss. Next one hadn't any hoss. It was ten dollars if he had. Last one wanted 'leven dollars, pay in advance. I've got four dollars 'n' sixteen cents in my pocket. I've been up to Conway to bury my uncle. My folks sent me a telegraph. My little boy—he's had an accident. My train was late. I've got to get to Gloucester, sir. So I thought," added the traveller, simply, "I'd ask one of the neighbors. Neighbors is most gener'lly kind. Up our way they be. Sir—could you let me have a team to see my little boy before—in case—he dies?"

"Come inside a minute," replied the gentleman.

The words, which had began shortly, ended softly. "Perfectly sober," he thought. His fingers stole to the button of a bell as the stranger stepped into the hall.

"Yes—I'll send you over. What's your name?"

"Dryver, sir. Jacob Dryver."

"Where do you live?"

"Squam."

"Annisquam? That is several miles beyond Gloucester. Your trouble is too swift for horses. I have rung for my chauffeur. I'll send you in the automobile. Be so good as to step around to the stables, Mr. Dryver. I'll join you outside."

Now the voice of a sleepy child could be heard overhead; it seemed to be trying to say "Popper! Popper!" A woman's figure drifted to the top of the padded stairs. The intruder caught a gleam of delicate white drapery floating with laces, closely gathered at the throat, and held with one ringed hand—as if it had been hastily thrown on. The door shut, and the bolts shot again. Jacob Dryver felt that he was at once trusted and distrusted; he could not have said why he did not go to the stables, but sat down on the broad granite steps. His knees hung apart; his elbows dropped to them; his face fell into his hands.

The child above continued to call: "Popper! Popper!" Then the little voice trailed away.

"It's smaller 'n Batty," Jacob said.

When he lifted his head from his hands, up the curving avenue an automobile was sweeping

upon him. Its acetylene lanterns blazed like the eyes of some prehistoric thing; but this simple fellow knew nothing about prehistoric things. The lanterns reminded him of the living creatures that Ezekiel saw. Such imagination as he had was Biblically trained, and leaped from Ezekiel to Elijah easily.

"It's a chariot of fire," thought Jacob Dryver, "comin' for to carry me home."

As he gathered himself and went to meet the miracle, a dark figure, encased in rubber armor from foot to head, brought the carriage to a swift and artistic stop.

"Are you the shove-her?" asked Jacob, timidly.

"I am not the shove-her," replied the figure at the brake, "and I hope I sha'n't have to be. I am Mr. Chester. My chauffeur is not at home, I find. I shall drive you to Annisquam myself."

"You're takin' some trouble, sir," said Jacob, slowly. His head reeled. He felt that he was growing stupid under the whirlwind of events. He went down the long steps like a lame blind man. As he did so the bolts of the door behind him leaped back again, and the lady ran down and slid into the automobile. The fog glittered on the laces of her white woollen garment. Her husband thought of it as a negligée, but Jacob called it a wrapper. She was a dainty lady, and fair to look upon; her hair lay in long, bright braids upon her shoulders; she had caught up an automobile coat and cap, which she flung across her arm. Dryver heard her say: "I shall be—a little anxious. After all, you know nothing about him. Mayn't I go?"

"And leave Bert? I don't think I would, Mary. I've told James to sit up and watch. Draw the big bolt on top, and keep the lights all on. If I have good luck I shall be back in less than two hours. Good-bye, Mary—dear."

The last word lingered with the caressing accent which only long-tried marriage love ever puts into it. The lips of the two met silently, and, drooping, the lady melted away. Jacob Dryver found himself in the automobile, speeding down the avenue to the silent street. He looked back once at the house. Every pane of glass was blazing as if the building were on fire.

"You'll find it colder than you expect," observed Mr. Chester. "I brought along Thomas's coat. Put it on—and hold on. Never in one of these before, were you?"

"N-no, sir," chattered Jacob Dryver. "Thank you, sir. I n-never was."

He clung to the side of the seat desperately. In fact, he was very much frightened. But he would have gone under the heavy wheels before he would have owned it. Spinning through the deserted Beverly streets the automobile took what seemed to him a startling pace.

"I'm going slowly till we get out of town," remarked Mr. Chester. "Once on the Manchester road I'll let her out a bit."

Jacob made no reply. What had seemed to be fog drenched and drowned him now like driving rain. There had been no wind, but now the powers and principalities of the air were let loose. He gasped for breath, which was driven down his throat. That made him think of Batty, whom, for the moment, he had actually forgotten. When people died—they could not— Had Batty—by this time—it was so long—should he find that Batty—

"What ails your boy?" asked the half-invisible figure from the depths of its rubber armor.

"I had a telegraph," said Jacob, monotonously. "I never was away from home so far—I ain't used to travellin'. I supposed the train would wait for the accident. The telegraph said he was hurt bad. I got it just as the fun'ril was leavin' the house. I had to quit it, corpse 'n' all—for Batty. I ran all the way to the depot. I just got aboard, and here I be becalmed all night—and there is Batty.—His name is Batwing," added the father. "He was named after the uncle I went to bury. But we call him Batty."

"Any more children?" inquired Mr. Chester, in the cultivated, compassionate voice which at once attracted and estranged the breaking heart of Jacob Dryver.

"We haven't only Batty, sir," he choked.

The hand on the lever tightened; the throttle opened; the dark figure in the rubber coat bent, and its muscles turned to iron. The automobile began to rock and fly. It was now whirling out upon the silent, sleeping road that goes by the great houses of the North Shore.

"I'll let her out a little," said Mr. Chester, quietly. "Don't worry. We'll get there before you know it."

The car took on a considerable pace. Jacob's best straw hat flew off, but he did not mention it. His red hair stood endwise, all ways, on his head; his eyes started; his hands gripped—one at the rail, one at the knee of his companion. The wind raised by the motion of the car became a gale and forced itself into his lungs. Jacob gasped:

"It's—on account—of Batty."

"I have a little boy of my own," observed Mr. Chester. Plainly thinking to divert the attention of the anguished father, he continued: "*He* had an accident this summer—he was hurt by a scythe; he slipped away from his nurse. He was pretty badly hurt. I was away—I hurried from Bar Harbor to get to him. I think I know how you feel."

"Did you have a telegraph, sir?" asked Dryver, rousing to the throb of the common human poise.

"Yes, there was a telegram. But I was a good while getting it. I understand your position."

"Did he ever get over it—your little boy? Oh, I see; that was him I heard. 'Popper,' he says —'Popper.'"

Above the whir of the automobile, above the chatter of the exhaust, above the voice of the wind, the sound of a man's muffled groan came distinctly to the ear that was fine enough to hear it.

"Trust me," said Chester, gently. "I'll get you there. I'll get you to your boy."

The gentleman's face was almost as white now as Jacob Dryver's. The fog glistened upon his mustache and made him look a gray-haired man, as he emerged from gulfs of darkness and shot by widely scattered dim street lamps. Both men had acquired something of the same expression—the rude face and the finished one; both wore the solemn, elemental look of fatherhood.

The heart of one repeated piteously: "It's Batty."

But the other thought: "What if it were Bert?"

"I'll let her out a little more," repeated Chester. The car throbbed and rocked to the words.

"How do you like my machine?" he added, in a comfortable voice. He felt that the mercury of emotion had mounted too far. "Mrs. Chester has named her," he proceeded. "We call her Aurora."

"Hey?"

"We've named the machine Aurora, I said."

"'Roarer,' sir?"

"Oh, well, that will do—'Roarer,' if you like. That isn't bad. It's an improvement, perhaps. By-the-way, how did you happen on my place to-night? There are a good many nearer the station; you had quite a walk."

"I see a little pair o' reins an' bells in the grass alongside—such as little boys play horse with. We had one once for Batty, sir."

"*Ah*! Was that it? What's your business, Dryver? You haven't told me. Do you fish?"

"Winters, I make paving-stones. Summers, I raise vegetables," replied Jacob Dryver. "I'm a kind of a quarry-farmer. My woman she plants flowers for the summer folks, and Batty bunches 'em up and delivers 'em. Batty—he—God! My God! Mebbe there *ain't any Batty*—"

The sentence broke. In truth, it would have been hard to find its remnants in the sudden onset of sound made by the motion of the machine.

The car was freed now to the limit of her mighty strength. She took great leaps like those of a living heart that is overexcited. Powerfully, perfectly, without let or hindrance, without flaw or accident, the chariot of fire bounded through the night. A trail of smoke like the tail of a comet followed her. The dark scenery of the guarded shore flew by; Montserrat was behind; Prides' was gone; the Farms blew past.

They were now well out upon the beautiful, silent Manchester road, where the woods, solemn at noonday, are sinister at dead of night. The automobile, flying through them, encountered no answering sign of life. Both men had ceased to speak. Awe fell upon them, as if in the presence of more than natural things. Once it seemed to Dryver as if he saw a boy running beside the machine—a little fellow, white, like a spirit, and, like a spirit, silent. Chester's hands had stiffened to the throttle; his face had the stern rigidity of those on whom life or human souls absolutely depend. Neither man spoke now aloud.

To himself Jacob Dryver repeated: "It's Batty! It's my Batty!"

And Hurlburt Chester thought: "What if it were Bert?"

Now the great arms of the sea began to open visibly before them. The fog on their lips grew salter, and they seemed to have entered the Cave of the Winds. Slender beach and sturdy headland slid by. West Manchester, Manchester, Magnolia rushed past. In the Magnolia woods they lost the sea again; but the bell-buoy called from Norman's Woe, and they could hear the moan of the whistling-buoy off Eastern Point. In the Cape Ann Light the fog bell was tolling.

At the pace which the car was taking there was an element of danger in the situation which Jacob Dryver could not measure, since he feared safety ignorantly and met peril with composure. Chester reduced the speed a little, and yet a little more, but pushed on steadily. Once Jacob spoke.

"I'll bet your shove-her couldn't drive like you do," he said, proudly.

Fresh Water Cove slipped by; Old Stage Fort was behind; the Aurora bumped over the pavement of the Cut, and reeled through the rough and narrow streets of Gloucester. He of Beverly was familiar with the route, and asked no questions. The car, now tangled among electric tracks, swung around the angle from Main Street carefully, jarred across the railroad, and took the winding, dim road to Annisquam.

Bay View flew behind—the bridge—the village—the pretty arcade known as Squam Willows. The automobile dashed into it and out of it as if it were a tunnel. Then Dryver gripped the other's arm and, without a word, pointed.

The car followed the guidance of his shaking finger, and, like a conscious creature, swung to a startling stop.

There were lights in the quarryman's cottage, and shadows stirred against drawn shades. Jacob Dryver tumbled out and ran. He did not speak, nor by a gesture thank his Beverly "neighbor." Chester slowly unbuttoned his rubber coat and got at his watch. The Aurora had covered the distance—in dark and fog, over seventeen miles—in fifty-six minutes. Now, Jacob, dashing in, had left the door open, and Chester, as he put his watch back into its pocket, heard that which sent the blood driving through his arteries as the power had driven the pumps of the car. The sound that he heard was the fretful moan of a hurt child.

As he had admitted, he was a Christian—sometimes; and he said, "Oh, thank God!" with all his generous heart. Indeed, as he did so, he took off his heavy cap and bared his head.

Then he heard the sobbing of a shaken man close beside him.

"Sir! Oh, sir! The God of Everlastin' bless you, sir. Won't you come and look at him?"

Batty lay quietly; he had put his little fingers in his father's hand; he did not notice the stranger. The boy's mother, painfully poised on one elbow in the position that mothers take when they watch sick children, lay upon the other side of the bed. She was a large woman, with a plain, good face. She had on a polka-dotted, blue cotton wrapper which nobody called a negligée. Her mute, maternal eyes went to the face of the visitor and reverted to the child.

There was a physician in the room—a very young, to the trained eye an inexperienced, man; in fact, the medical situation was unpromising and complicated. It took Chester but a few moments to gauge it, and to perceive that his mission to this afflicted household had not ended with a lost night's sleep and an automobile record.

The local doctor, it seemed, was away from home when Batty's accident befell; the Gloucester surgeon was ill; some one had proposed the hospital, but the mother had the prejudices of her class. A neighbor had suggested this young man—a new-comer to the town—one of the flotsam practitioners who drift and disappear. Recommended upon the ground that he had successfully prescribed headache pills to a Swedish cook, this stranger had received into his unskilled hands the emergency of a dangerously wounded lad. The accident, in fact, was more serious than Chester had supposed. He had now been told that the child was crushed by an automobile racing through Annisquam Willows the day before.

The boy, it was plain, was sorely hurt, and ignorant suffering lay at the mercy of ignorant treatment, in the hopeless and helpless subjection to medical etiquette which costs so many lives.

"Dryver," said Chester, quietly, "you need a surgeon here at once. Your physician is quite willing to consult with any one you may call." He shot one stern glance at the young doctor, who quavered a frightened assent. "I know a distinguished surgeon—he is a friend of mine; it was he who saved my boy in that accident I told you of, this summer. He is not far away; he is at a hotel on Eastern Point. I can have him here in twenty—well, say twenty-five minutes. Of course, we must wait for him to dress."

The woman raised her head and stared upon the gentleman. One swift, brilliant gleam shot from her heavy eyes. She had read of angels in the Bible. She had noticed, indeed, that they were men angels. But she had never heard of one in a rubber touring-coat, drenched from head to foot with fog, spattered from foot to head with mud, and with a wedding-ring upon his fine hand.

Jacob Dryver began: "Sir! The God of Everlastin'—" but he sobbed so that he could not finish what he would have said. So Chester went out and oiled the Aurora, opened the throttle, and started off again, and dashed through the rude streets of Gloucester to her summer shore.

Dawn was rose-gray over Eastern Point, and the tide had turned upon the harbor, when the

"Roarer" curved up quietly to the piazza of the hotel.

It was rose-gray upon Annisquam, and the tide was rising up the river, when the great surgeon went into the little place where the lad lay fighting for his mangled life. There had been some delay in rousing the sleeper—it was a trip of six rough miles twice taken—and it was thirty-five minutes before his "merciless merciful" hands went to work upon the mortal need of the boy.

The child had been crushed across the hips and body, and only an experienced or only an eminent skill could have saved the little fellow.

In the blossoming day Jacob Dryver limped out and stood in the front yard among his wife's flowers that Batty "bunched up" and sold to summer people. He could not perceive the scent of the flowers—only that of the ether. His big boot caught in a sweet-pea vine and tore it. One of the famous carmine dahlias of Cape Ann seemed to turn its large face and gaze at him.

An old neighbor—a cross-eyed lobsterer, going to his traps—came by, cast a shrewd look, and asked how the boy was. Jacob did not reply to the lobsterer; he lifted his wet eyes to the sky, then they fell to a bed of blazing nasturtiums, which seemed to smoke before them. His lips tried to form the words which close like a strangling hand upon the throat of the poor in all the emergencies of life. Till he has answered this question a poor man may not love a woman or rear a child; he may not bury his dead or save his living.

"*What will it cost?*" asked Jacob Dryver. He looked piteously at the great surgeon, whose lips parted to speak. But Hurlburt Chester raised an imperious hand.

"That," he said, "is my affair."

It was broad, bright day when the Aurora came whirring home. Chester nodded to his wife at the window, but went directly to the stables. It was a little longer than she expected before he returned. She waited at the head of the stairs, then hurried half-way down to meet him. Her white robe was ungirdled and flowing; it fell apart—the laces above from the laces below—and the tired man's kiss fell upon her soft throat.

She was naturally a worrier in a sweet-natured way, but he had always been patient with her little weakness; some men are, with anxious women.

"No," he smiled, but rather feebly; "you've missed it again. The boy is saved. St. Clair's got hold of him. I'll talk presently, Mary—not just now."

In fact, he would say no more till he had bathed and taken food. He looked so exhausted that she brought his breakfast to his bed, serving it with her own hands, and asking no questions at all; for, although she worried, she was wise. She sent for the baby, too—a big baby, three years old—and Chester enfolded the chin of the child in his slender brown hand silently.

Then he said: "Lock the door, Mary. I've something to tell you."

When she had drawn the brass bolt and returned, somewhat pale herself with wonder and alarm, to the side of the bed, her husband spoke abruptly:

"Mary, you've got to know it—may as well have it over. I found this pinned on the stable wall. It was the Aurora that ran over the—that—that poor little fellow."

His hand shook as he laid the piece of paper in her own. And while she read it he covered his face; for he was greatly over-worn, and the strain which he had undergone seemed now to have leaped again with the spring of a creature that one supposes one has left lifeless behind.

Mrs. Chester read the writing and laid it down. It ran like this:

> MR. CHESTER:
>
> Sir,—Ime goin away while I can. It was me run over that boy while you was in town. I took Her out for a spin. I let Her out some racin with another one in the Willows an he got under Her someways. I see it in the papers so I was afraid of manslorter. Ime awful cut up about it so Ime goin to lite out while I can.
>
> Your obedient servant,
> THOMAS.

The eyes of the husband and wife met silently. She was the first to speak.

"Do they know?"

Chester shook his head.

"You'll tell them, of course?"

"I haven't made up my mind."

The baby was jabbering loudly on the bed—he was very noisy; it was not easy for her to hear what was said.

"I'm sure you ought to tell them!" she cried, passionately.

"Perhaps so. But I'd like to think it over."

A subtle terror slid over her face. "What can they do to you? I don't know about such things. Is there any—law?"

"Laws enough—laws in plenty. But I'm not answerable for the crimes of my chauffeur. It's only a question of damages."

The wife of the rich man drew a long breath. "Oh, if it's nothing but *money*!"

"Not that it would make any difference if they *could* touch me," he continued, with a proud motion of his tired head. "It's purely a question of feeling—it's a question of right within a right, Mary. It's to do what is really kind by these people— Why, Mary, if you could have seen it! From beginning to end it was the most beautiful, the most wonderful thing. Nothing of the kind ever happened to me before. Mary, if an angel from the throne of God had done it—they couldn't have felt—they couldn't have treated me—it was enough to make a fellow a better man the rest of his days. Why, it was worth *living* for, I tell you! ... And now to let them know..."

Hurlburt Chester was very tired, as we say. He choked, and hid his pale face in his pillow. And his wife laid hers beside it and cried—as women do—without pretending that she didn't. But the baby laughed aloud. And then there drove through the father's mind the repeated phrase which followed the race of the "Roarer" all the way from Beverly to Annisquam:

"What if it were Bert?"

Chester's head whirled yet from the fatigue and jar of the trip, and the words seemed to take leaps through his brain as the car leaped when she was at the top of her great speed. So he kissed the child, and dashed a drop from his cheek quite openly—since only Mary saw.

A constraint unusual to their candid relations breathed like a fog between the husband and the wife; indeed, it did not lift altogether as the autumn opened and closed.

Chester's visits to Annisquam (in which she once or twice accompanied him) were many and merciful; and the distinguished surgeon took the responsibility of the case till the boy was quite convalescent. The lad recovered slowly, but St. Clair promised that the cure would be complete.

The touching gratitude of Jacob Dryver amounted to an idealization such as the comfortable, undramatic life of Chester had never experienced. He seemed to swim in it as an imaginative person dreams of swimming in the air, tree-high above the heads of the crowd on the earth. The situation had become to him a fine intoxicant—but it had its reactions, as intoxicants must.

September and October burned to ashes upon the North Shore. Fire of maple, flash of sumac, torch of elder, flare of ivy, faded into brown November, and the breakers off the Beverly coast took on the greens and blues of north-wind weather below the line of silver surf.

The Chesters closed "their own hired house" and moved to town. The Aurora remained in her stable, nor had she left it since the morning when she came wearily back from Annisquam.

His wife had noticed, but had not seemed to notice, that Chester rode no more that fall. She noted too, but did not seem to note, that he continued his visits to the injured lad after they had returned to the city.

On all the great holidays he made a point of going down—Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New-Year's Day. Mrs. Chester had wished to duplicate for the quarryman's boy the Christmas gifts of her own child (such had been her pretty fancy), but Batty was quite a lad—ten years old; and Bert, like a spoiled collie, was yet a baby, and likely to remain so for some time to come. So the mother contented herself, perforce, with less intimate remembrances. Once, when she had packed a box of miracles—toys and books, clothes and candy—she thrust it from her with a cry: "They would never touch these—if they knew! Hurlburt! Hurlburt! don't you think they ought to know?"

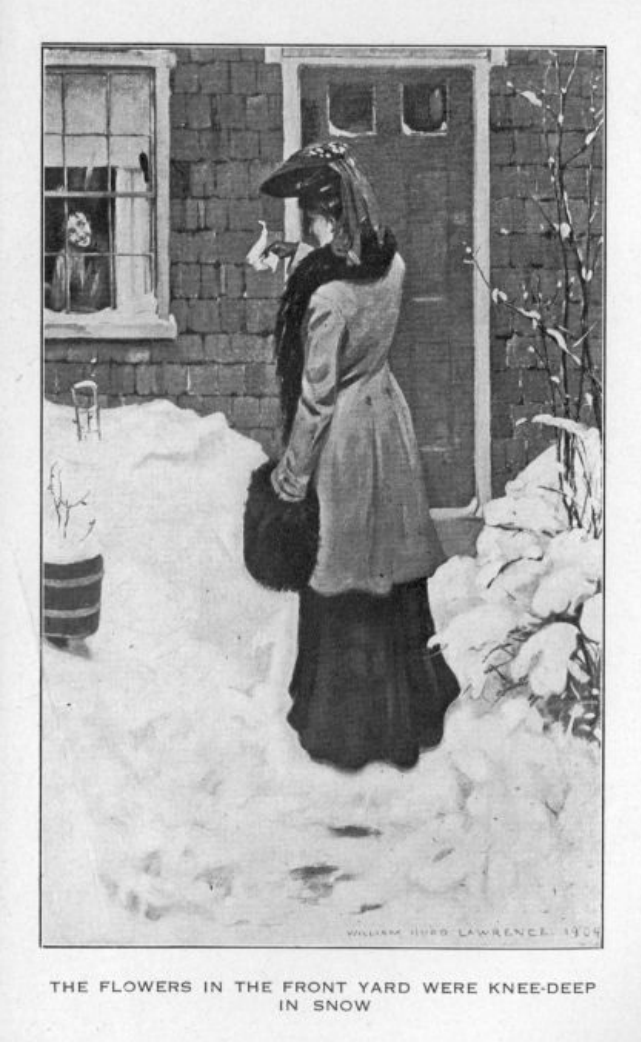
"Do what you think best, Mary," he said, wearily. "I have never been able to decide that question. But you are free to do so if you prefer."

He regarded her with an expression that went to her heart. She flung herself into his arms and tried to kiss it away.

Now, Mary Chester, as we have said, was a worrier, and the worrier never lets a subject go. As the winter set in, her mind closed about the matter which had troubled her, and it began to become unbearable, like a foreign substance in the flesh.

On a January afternoon—it was one of those dark days when souls cloud over—she flung on her furs, and leaving a pencilled line to her husband saying what she had done, she took the train to Gloucester, and a dreary electric-car to Annisquam.

The flowers in the front yard were knee-deep in snow, and Batty sat in the window busy with a Sorrento wood-saw of her providing. He laughed outright when he saw her, and his mother flung open the door as if she had flung open her heart.



THE FLOWERS IN THE FRONT YARD WERE KNEE-DEEP IN SNOW

THE FLOWERS IN THE FRONT YARD WERE KNEE-DEEP IN SNOW

"Land!" she cried. "In all this snow!"

She finished tying a fresh white apron over her polka-dotted blue wrapper, and joyously led the lady in.

Batty was a freckled little fellow, with red hair like his father's; he had the pretty imperiousness of a sick and only child who has by all the sorceries contrived to escape petulance. When he had greeted the visitor, he ran back to his jig-saw. He was carving camwood, which stained his fingers crimson.

"I want to see you—alone," began Mrs. Chester, nervously. It had been one of Chester's pleasures to warm the entire house for the convalescent lad, and big coal fires were purring in Batty's bedroom and in the ten-foot "parlor," whither his mother conducted her guest. The doors were left open. The scent of the camwood came across, pungent and sickening. The fret of the jig-saw went on steadily.

"He's makin' a paper-cutter—for Mr. Chester," observed Batty's mother. "He made a watch-case last week—for Mr. Chester."

Mary Chester paled, and she plunged at once:

"There's something I've come to tell—I've *got* to tell you. We can't keep it to ourselves any

longer. I have come to tell you how it happened—that Batty— We thought you'd rather not know —"

"Lord! my dear," said the quarryman's wife, "we've known it all the while."

The visitor's head swam. She laid it down upon her gloved hands on Mrs. Dryver's centre-table. This had a marble top, and felt as the quarries look in winter on Cape Ann. What were tears that they should warm it? The sound of the jig-saw grew uneven and stopped.

"Hush!" said the boy's mother. "*Batty* don't know; he's the only one that don't."

She tiptoed and shut the doors.

"You never seen Peter Trawl, did you? He's a neighbor—cross-eyed—sells lobsters—well, it was him picked Batty up to the Willows that day. So he seen the number runnin' away, an' so he told. We've known it from fust to last, my dear."

"And never spoke!" said Mary Chester. "And never spoke!"

"What's the use of jabberin'?" asked Batty's mother. "We thought Mr. Chester 'd feel so bad," she added. "We thought he didn't know."

The worrier began to laugh, then cry—first this, then that; for her nerves gave way beneath her. She sat humbly in her rich furs before the quarryman's wife. She felt that these plain people had outdone her in nobility, as they had rivalled her in delicacy—her, and Hurlburt, too.

"Oh, come and see my baby!" she cried. It was the only thing that occurred to her to say.

Now at that moment Batty gave a little yelp of ecstasy, threw down his jig-saw, and got to the front door. His father was there, stamping off the snow, and the lad's idol, his ideal, his man angel, stood upon the threshold—nervous, for an angel, and with an anxious look.

But when the two men saw the women crying together upon the quarry-cold centre-table, they clasped hands and said nothing at all.

THE END

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