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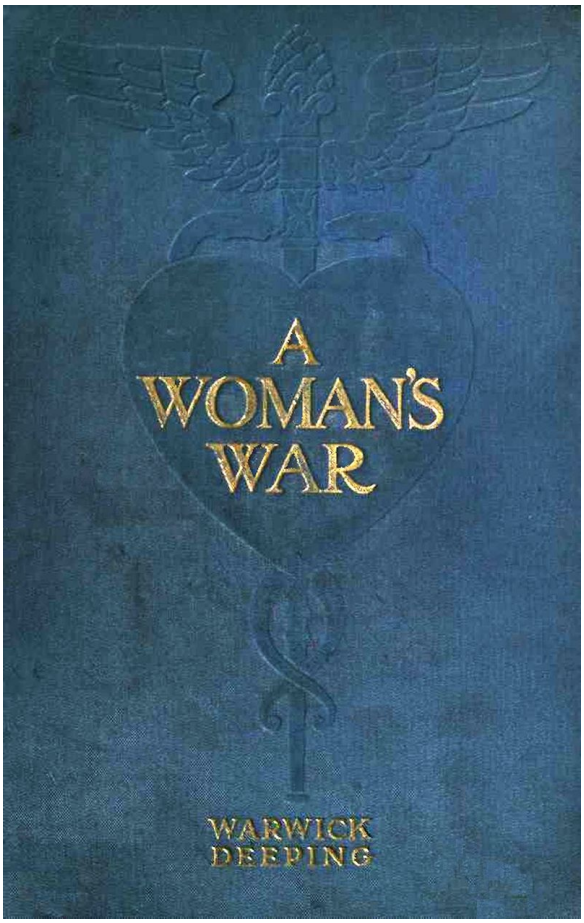

A WOMAN'S WAR

A Novel

BY

WARWICK DEEPING

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“BESS OF THE WOODS”
“THE SLANDERERS”
ETC.

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TO

COULSON KERNAHAN

MY FATHER’S FRIEND—AND MINE
IN MEMORY OF
MANY GENEROUS WORDS—AND DEEDS

A WOMAN’S WAR

CHAPTER I

There was a ripple of chimes through the frosty air as Catherine Murchison turned from King’s Walk into Lombard Street, and saw the moon shining white and clear between the black parapets and chimney-stacks of the old houses. St. Antonia’s steeple was giving the hour of three, and a babel of lesser tongues answered from the silence of the sleeping town. Hoar-frost glittered on the cypresses that stood in a garden bounding the road, and the roofs were like silver under the hard, moonlit sky.

Catherine Murchison stopped before the great red-brick house with its white window-sashes, and its Georgian air of solidity and comfort. The brass lion’s-head on the door seemed to twinkle a welcome to her above the plate that carried her husband’s name. She smiled to herself as she drew the latch-key from the pocket under her sables, the happy smile of a woman who comes home with no searchings of the heart. Several shawl-clad figures went gliding along under the shadows of the cypresses, giving her good-night with a flutter of laughter and tapping of shoes along the stones. Catherine waved her hand to the beshawled ones as they scurried home, and caught a glimpse of St. Antonia’s spire diademed by the winter stars. She remembered such a night seven years ago, and man’s love and mother’s love had come to her since then.

Catherine closed the door gently, knowing that her husband would be asleep after a hard day’s work. It was not often that he went with her to the social gatherings of Roxton. Professional success, fraught with the increasing responsibilities thereof, brightened his own fireside for him, and Catherine his wife would rather have had it so. James Murchison was no dapper drawing-room physician. The man loved his home better than the dinner-tables of his patients. He was young, and he was ambitious with his grave and purposeful Saxon sanity. His wife took the social yoke from off his shoulders, content in her heart to know that she had made the man’s home dear to him.

A standard-lamp was burning in the hall, the light streaming under a red-silk shade upon the Oriental rugs covering the mellow and much polished parquetry. There were a few old pictures on the walls, pewter and brass lighting the dead oak of an antique dresser. Catherine Murchison looked round her with a breathing in of deep content. She unwrapped the shawl from about her hair, rich russet red hair that waved in an aureole about her face. Her sable cloak had swung back from her bosom, showing the black ball-dress, red over the heart with a knot of hothouse flowers.

There was a wholesome and generous purity in the white curves of her throat and shoulders.

Catherine laid her cloak over an old Dutch chair, and turned to the table where fruits, biscuits, and candles had been left for her. Her husband's gloves lay on the table, and his hat with one of Gwen's dolls tucked up carefully herein. Catherine's eyes seemed to mingle thoughts of child and man, as she ate a few biscuits and looked at Miss Gwen's protégé stuffed into the hat. James Murchison had had a long round that day, with the cares and conflicts of a man who labors to satisfy his own conscience. Catherine hoped not to wake him; she had even refused to be driven home lest the sound of wheels should carry a too familiar warning to his ears. She lit her candle, and, reaching up, turned out the lamp. Her feet were on the first step of the stairs when a streak of light in the half-darkness of the hall brought her to a halt.

Some one had left the lamp burning in her husband's study. She stepped back across the hall, and hesitated a moment as other thoughts occurred to her. Housebreaking was a dead art in Roxton, and she smiled at the melodramatic imaginings that had seized her for the moment.

A reading-lamp stood on the table before the fire, that had sunk to a dull and dirty red in the smokeless grate. The walls of the room were panelled with books and the glass faces of several instrument cabinets—the room of no mere specialist, no haunter of one alley in the metropolis of intelligence. On the sofa lay the figure of a man asleep, his deep breathing audible through the room.

To the wife there was nothing strange in finding her husband sleeping the sleep of the tired worker before the dying fire. Her eyes had a laughing tenderness in them, a sparkle of mischief, as she set down the candle and moved across the room. Her feet touched something that rolled under her dress. She stooped, and looked innocent enough as she picked up an empty glass.

"James—"

There was mirth in the voice, but her eyes showed a puzzled intentness as she noticed the things that stood beside the lamp upon the table. An open cigar-box, a tray full of crumbled ash and blackened matches, a couple of empty syphons, a decanter standing in an ooze of spilled spirit. Memory prompted her, and she smiled at the suggestion. Porteus Carmagee, that prattling, white-bobbed maker of wills and codicils had slipped in for a smoke and a gossip. James Murchison never touched alcohol, and the inference was obvious enough, for her experience of Mr. Carmagee's loquacity justified her in concluding that he had droned her husband to sleep.

Wifely mischief was in the ascendant on the instant. She stooped over the sleeping man whose face was in the shadow, put her lips close to his, and drew back with a little catching of the breath. The room seemed to grow dark and very cold of a sudden. She straightened, and stood rigid, staring across the room with a sense of hurrying at the heart.

Then, as though compelling herself, she lifted the lamp, and held it so that the light fell full upon her husband's face.

CHAPTER II

Man is the heir of many ancestors, and his inheritance of life's estate may prove cumbered by mortgages unredeemed by earlier generations.

In the spring of the year the blood is hot, and the quicksilver of youth burns in the brain. The poise of true manhood is not reached at twenty, the experience to know, the strength to grapple. James Murchison of the broad back and sunny face, first of good fellows, popular among all, had followed the joy of being and feeling even into shady back-street rooms. In the hospital "common-room" he had always had a knot of youngsters round him, lounging, smoking, lads with no studied vice in them, but lads to whom life was a thing of zest. For Murchison it had been the crest of the wave, the day of the world's youth. An orphan with money at his bank, the liberty of London calling him, a dozen mad youngsters to form a coterie! As for heredity and such doctrines of man's ascent and fall, he had not studied them in the thing he called himself.

James Murchison had carved up corpses, electrified frogs, and learned the art of dispensing physic before the world taught him to discover that there were other things to conquer besides text-books and examiners. His father had died of drink, and his grandfather before him, and God knows how many fat Georgian kinsmen had contributed to the figures on the debit side. From his mother he had inherited wholesome yeoman blood, and the dower perhaps had made him what he was, straight-backed, clean-limbed, strong in the jaw, brave and blue about the eyes. There had been no blot on him till he had gone up to London as a lonely boy. There in the solitude the world had caught him, and tossed him out of his dingy rooms to taste the wine of the world's pleasures.

The phase was natural enough, and there had been plenty of young fools to applaud it in him. The first slip had come after a hospital concert; the second after a football match; the third had followed a successful interview with the Rhadamanthi who passed candidates in the duties of midwifery. An ejectment from a music-hall, a brawl in Oxford Street, a *liaison* with a demi-mondaine, complaints from landladies, all these had reached the ears of the Dean's "great ones" who sat in conclave. Murchison had been argued with in private by a gray-haired surgeon who had that strong grip on life that goes with virility and the noble sincerity of faith.

"Fight yourself, sir," the old man had said; "fight as though the devil had you by the throat. If you bring children into the world you will set a curse on them unless you break your chains." And Murchison had gone out from him with a set jaw and an awakened manhood.

Then for the first time in life he learned the value of a friend. The man was dead now; he had died in Africa, dragged down by typhoid in some sweltering Dutch town. James Murchison remembered him always with a warming of the heart. He remembered how they had gone together to a little Sussex village by the sea, taken a coast-guard's disused cottage for eighteen pence a week, bathed, fished, cooked their own food, and pitched stones along the sand. James Murchison

had fought himself those summer weeks, growing brown-faced as a gypsy between sun and sea. He had taken the wholesome strength of it into his soul, passed through the furnace of his last two years unscathed, and set out on life, a man with a keen mouth, clean thoughts, and six feet of Saxon strength. The world respected him, never so much as dreaming that he had the devil of heredity tight bound within his heart.

"Dear, are you better now?"

He had told her everything, sitting in the dusk before the fire, one fist under his chin, and his eyes the eyes of a strong man enduring bitter shame. Woman's love had watched over him that day. She had striven to lift him up out of the dust of his deep remorse, and had opened her whole heart to him, showing the quiet greatness of her nature in her tenderness towards this strong man in his sorrow.

"Kate, how can you bear this!"

"Bear it, dear?"

"Finding so much of the beast in me. My God, I thought the thing was dead; we are never dead, dear, to our father's sins."

She came and sat beside him before the fire, a man's woman, pure, generous, trusty to the deeps. The light made magic in her hair, and showed the unfathomable faith within her eyes.

"Put the memory behind you," she said, looking up into his face.

He groaned, as though dust and ashes still covered his manhood.

"You are too good to me, Kate."

"No," and she drew his hands down into her bosom; the warmth thereof seemed to comfort him as a mother's breast comforts a child at night.

"I am glad you have told me—all."

"Yes—all."

"It helps me, it will help us both."

"I ought to have told you long ago," he said.

"But then—"

"I thought that I had killed the thing, and I loved you, dear, and perhaps I was a coward."

She drew closer to him, leaning against his knee, while one of his strong arms went about her body. The warm darkness of the room seemed full of the sacred peace of home. They were both silent, silent for many minutes till the sound of children's laughter came down from the rooms above.

James Murchison bent forward, and drew a deep breath as though in pain. The flash of sympathy was instant in its passage. Husband and wife were thinking the same thoughts.

"Kate, you must help me to fight this down—"

"Yes."

"For their sakes, the children—for yours. I think that I have worked too hard of late. When the strength's out of one, the devil comes in and takes command. And the servants, you are sure—?"

She felt the spasmodic girding of all his manhood, and yearned to him with all her heart.

"They knew nothing; I saved that. Don't let us talk of it; the thing is over"—and she tried not to shudder. "Ah—I am glad I know, dear, I can do so much."

James Murchison bent down and drew her into his arms, and she lay there awhile, feeling that the warmth of her love passed into her husband's body. The hearth was red before them with the fire-light, and they heard the sound of their children playing.

"Shall we go up to them?" she said, at last.

"Yes"—and she knew by his face that he was praying, not with mere words, but with every life-throb of his being—"it will do me good. God bless you—"

And they kissed each other.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Betty Steel sat alone at the breakfast-table with a silver teapot covered with a crimson cosy before her, and a pile of letters and newspapers at her elbow. The west front of St. Antonia's showed through the window, buttress and pinnacle glimmering up into the morning sunlight. Frost-rimed trees spun a scintillant net against the blue. The quiet life of the old town went up with its lazy plumes of smoke into the crisp air.

Mrs. Betty Steel drew a slice of toast from the rack, toyed with it, and looked reflectively at her husband's empty chair. She was a dark, sinuous, feline creature was Mrs. Betty, with a tight red mouth, and an olive whiteness of skin under her black wreath of hair. Her hands were thin, mercurial, and yet suggestive of pretty and graceful claws. A clever woman, cleverer with her head than with her heart, acute, elegant, aggressive, yet often circuitous in her methods. She had abundant impulse in her, blood, and clan, even evidenced by the way in which she ripped the wrapper from a copy of the *Wilmenden Mail*.

Mrs. Betty buried her face in the pages, crumbling her toast irritably as her eyes ran to and fro over the head-lines. She glanced up as her husband entered, a smooth-faced, compressed, and professional person, with an assured manner and an incisive cut of the mouth and chin.

"Any news in this hub of monotony?"

His wife put down the paper, and called back the dog who was poking his nose near the bacon-dish on the fire-guard.

"Quack medicines much in evidence. The fellows are arrant Papists, Parker; they promise to cure everything with nothing. Tea or coffee?"

Mrs. Betty spoke with the slight drawl that was habitual to her. Her admirers felt it to be distinguished, but its effect upon shop assistants was to spread the instincts of socialism.

Dr. Parker Steel declared for coffee, and took salt to his porridge. He was not a man who wasted words, save perhaps on the most paying patients. Professional ambition, and an aggressive conviction that he was to be the leading citizen in Roxton filled the greater part of the gentleman's sphere of consciousness.

"And local sensations?"

"Mrs. Pindar's ball, a very dull affair, sausage-rolls and jelly, and a floor like glue—probably."

"Any one there?"

"The Lombard Street clique, the Carnabys, Tom Flemming, Kate Murchison, etc., etc., etc."

Parker Steel grunted, and appeared to be estimating the number of cubes in the sugar bowl by way of exercising himself in the compilation of statistics.

"Murchison not there, I suppose?" he asked.

"The wife—quite sufficient."

Her husband smiled, showing the regular white teeth under his trim, black mustache with scarcely any flow of feeling in his features. Dr. Parker Steel was very proud of his teeth and finger-nails.

"You don't love that lady much, eh?"

Mrs. Betty's refined superciliousness trifled with the suggestion.

"Kate Murchison? I cannot say that I ever trouble much about her. Rather fat and vulgar—perhaps. Fat women do not appeal to me; they seem to carry sentimentality and gush about with them like patchouli. Do you think that you are gaining ground on Murchison, Parker, eh?"

The husband appeared confident.

"Perhaps."

"Old Hicks will resign the Hospital soon; you must take it."

"Not worth the trouble."

Mrs. Betty's dark eyes condemned the assertion.

"Dirt's money in the wrong place, as they say in trade, Parker."

"Well?" And the amused consort glanced at her with a cold flicker of affection.

"Study it on utilitarian principles. Lady Twaddle-twaddle sends her cook, or her gardener, or her boot-boy to be treated in Roxton Hospital. You exercise yourself on the boot-boy or the cook, and Lady Twaddle-twaddle approves the cure. Praise is never thrown away. Let the old ladies who attend missionary meetings say of you, 'that Dr. Steel is so kind and attentive to the poor.' We have to lay the foundation of a palace in the soil."

Parker Steel chuckled, knowing that behind Mrs. Betty's elegant verbiage there was a tenacity of purpose that would have surprised her best friends.

"I wonder whether Murchison is as privileged as I am?" he said, passing his cup over the red tea cosy.

"I suppose the woman gushes for him, just as I work my wits for you."

"The Amazons of Roxton."

"We live in a civilized age, Parker, but the battle is no less bitter for us. I use my head. Half the words I speak are winged for a final end."

"You are clever enough, Betty," he confessed.

"We both have brains"—and she gave an ironical laugh—"I shall not be content till the world, our world, fully recognizes that fact. Old Hicks is past his work. Murchison is the only rival you need consider. Therefore, Parker, our battle is with the gentleman of Lombard Street."

"And with the wife?"

"That is my affair."

Such life feuds as are chronicled in the hatred of a Fredegonde for a Brunehaut may be studied in miniature in many a modern setting. Ever since childhood Betty Steel and Catherine Murchison had been born foes. Their innate instincts had seemed antagonistic and repellent, and the life of Roxton had not chastened the tacit feud. Girls together at the same school, they had fought for leadership and moral sway. Catherine had been one of those creatures in whom the deeper feelings of womanhood come early to the surface. Children had loved her; her arms had been always open to them, and she had stood out as a species of little mother to whom the owners of bleeding knees had run for comfort.

The rivalry of girlhood had deepened into the rivalry of womanhood. They were the "beauties" of Roxton; the one generous, ruddy, and open-hearted; the other sleek, white-faced, a studied artist in elegance and charm. Both were admired and championed by their retainers; Catherine popular with the many, Betty served by the few. Miss Elizabeth had beheld herself the less favored goddess, and as of old the apple of Paris had had the power to inflame.

Catherine's final crime against her rival had been her marrying of James Murchison. Miss Betty had chosen the gentleman for herself, though she would rather have bitten her tongue off than have confessed the fact. The hatred of the wife had been extended to the husband, and Dr. Parker Steel had assuaged the smart. And thus the rivalry of these two women lived on intensified by the professional rivalry of two men.

As for my lady Betty, she hated the wife in Lombard Street with all the quiet virulence of her nature. It was the hate of the head for the heart, of the intellect for the soul. Envy and jealousy were sponsors to the bantling that Betty Steel had reared. Catherine Murchison had children; Mrs. Steel had none. Her detestation of her rival was the more intense even because she recognized the good in her that made her loved by others. Catherine Murchison had a larger following than Mrs. Steel in Roxton, and the truth strengthened the poison in the stew.

With Catherine the feeling was more one of distaste than active enmity. Betty Steel repelled her, even as certain electrical currents repel the magnet. She mistrusted the woman, avoided her, even ignored her, an attitude which did not fail to influence Mrs. Betty. Catherine Murchison's heart was

too full of the deeper happiness of life for her to trouble her head greatly about the pale and fastidious Greek whose dark eyes flashed whenever she passed the great red brick house in Lombard Street. Life had a June warmth for Catherine. Nor had she that innate restlessness of soul that fosters jealousy and the passion for climbing above the common crowd.

Parker Steel reminded his wife, as he rose from the breakfast-table, of a certain charity concert that was to be given at the Roxton public hall the same evening.

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I believe so; Mrs. Fraser extorted a guinea from us; I may as well get something for my money. And you?"

Her husband smoothed his hair and looked in the mirror.

"Expecting a confinement. If you get a chance, be polite to old Fraser, she would be worth bagging in the future, and Murchison thieved her from old Hicks."

Catherine Murchison sang at the charity concert that night, and Mrs. Betty listened to her with the outward complacency of an angel. The big woman in her black dress, with a white rose in her ruddy hair, bowed and smiled to the enthusiasts of the Roxton slums who knew her nearly as well as they knew her husband. Catherine Murchison's rare contralto flowed unconcernedly over her rival's head. She sang finely, and without effort, and the voice seemed part of her, a touch of the sunset, a breath from the fields of June. Catherine's nature came out before men in her singing. A glorious unaffectedness, a charm with no trick of the self-conscious egoist. It was this very naturalness, this splendid unconcern that had forever baffled Mrs. Betty Steel. The woman was proof against the mundane sneer. Ridicule could not touch her, and the burrs of spite fell away from her smooth completeness.

"By George, what a voice that woman has!"

The bourgeoisie of Roxton was piling up its applause. Mrs. Murchison had half the small boys in the town as her devoted henchmen. Politically her personality would have carried an election.

"It comes from the heart, sir."

Porteous Carmagee, solicitor and commissioner for oaths, had his bald head tilted towards Mr. Thomas Flemming's ear. Mr. Flemming was one of the cultured idlers of the town, a gentleman who was an authority on ornithology, who presided often at the county bench, and could dash off a cartoon that was not quite clever enough for *Punch*.

"What did you say, Carmagee? The beggars are making such a din—"

"From the heart, sir, from the heart."

"Indigestion, eh?"

Mr. Carmagee was seized with an irritable twitching of his creased, brown face.

"Oh, an encore, that's good. I said, Tom, that Kate Murchison's voice came from her heart."

"Very likely, very likely."

"I could sit all night and hear her sing."

"I doubt it," quoth the man of culture, with a twinkle.

The opening notes rippled on the piano, and Mr. Carmagee lay back in his chair to listen. He was a little monkey of a man, fiery-eyed, wrinkled, with a grieved and husky voice that seemed eternally in a hurry. He knew everybody and everybody's business, and the secrets his bald pate covered would have trebled the circulation of the *Roxton Herald* in a week. Porteous Carmagee was godfather to Catherine Murchison's two children. She was one of the few women, and he had stated it almost as a grievance, who could make him admit the possible advantages of matrimony.

"Bravo, bravo"—and Mr. Carmagee slapped Tom Flemming's knee. 'When the swans fly towards the south, and the hills are all aglow.' I believe in woman bringing luck, my friend."

"Oh, possibly."

"Murchison took the right turning. Supposing he had married—"

Mr. Flemming trod on the attorney's toe.

"Look out, she's there; people have ears, you know; they're not chairs."

Mr. Carmagee nursed a grievance on the instant.

"Mention a name," he snapped.

And Thomas Flemming pointed towards Mrs. Betty with his programme.

Parker Steel's wife drove home alone in her husband's brougham, ignoring the many moonlight effects that the old town offered her with its multitudinous gables and timbered fronts. She was not in the happiest of tempers, feeling much like a sensuous cat that has been tumbled unceremoniously from some crusty stranger's lap. Betty had attempted blandishments with the distinguished Mrs. Fraser, and had been favored with a shoulder and half an aristocratic cheek. Moreover, she had watched the great lady melt under Catherine Murchison's smiles, and such incidents are not rose leaves to a woman.

Mrs. Betty lay back in a corner of the brougham, and indulged herself in mental tearings of Catherine Murchison's hair. What insolent naturalness this rival of hers possessed! Mrs. Betty was fastidious and critical enough, and her very acuteness compelled her to confess that her enmity seemed but a blunted weapon. Catherine Murchison was so cantankerously popular. She looked well, dressed well, did things well, loved well. The woman was an irritating prodigy. It was her very sincerity, the wholesomeness of her charm, that made her seem invulnerable, a woman who never worried her head about social competition.

Parker Steel sat reading before the fire when his wife returned. He uncurled himself languidly and with deliberation, pulled down his dress waistcoat, and put his book aside carefully on the table beside his chair.

"Enjoyed yourself?"

"Not vastly. I wonder why vulgar people always eat oranges in public?"

"Better than sucking lemons."

Mrs. Betty tossed her opera-cloak aside and slipped into a chair. Her husband's complacency irritated her a little. He was not a sympathetic soul, save in the presence of prominent patients.

“You look bored, dear. Who performed?”

“The usual amateurs. I am tired to death; are you coming to bed?”

Parker Steel looked at the clock, and sighed.

“I shall not be wanted till about five,” he said. “Confound these guinea babies. I hope to build a tariff wall round myself when we are more independent.”

“Yes, of course.”

“And Mrs. Fraser?”

“Safe in the other camp, dear.”

Parker Steel was dropping off to sleep that night when he felt his wife’s hand upon his shoulder. He turned with a grunt, and saw her white face dim amid her cloud of hair.

“Anything wrong?”

“No. Do you believe in Murchison, Parker?”

“Believe in him?”

“Yes, is he reliable; does he know his work?”

Her husband laughed.

“Why, do you want to consult the fellow?”

“You have never caught him tripping?”

“Not yet. What are you driving at?”

“Oh—nothing,” and she turned away, and put the hair back from her face, feeling feverish with the ferment of her thoughts.

CHAPTER IV

No one in Roxton would have imagined that any shadow of dread darkened the windows of the house in Lombard Street. Even to his most intimate friends, James Murchison would have appeared as the one man least likely to be dominated by any inherited taint of body or mind. His face was the face of a man who had mastered his own passions, the mouth firm yet generous, the jaw powerful, the eyes and forehead suggesting the philosopher behind the virility of the man of action. He had built up a substantial reputation for himself in Roxton and the neighborhood. His professional honesty was unimpeachable, his skill as a surgeon a matter of common gossip. But it was his warm-heartedness, the sincerity of his sympathy, his wholesome Saxon manliness that had won him popularity, especially among the poor.

For Catherine the uncovering of the past had come as a second awakening, a resanctification of her love. Women are the born champions of hero worship, and to generous natures imperfections are but as flints scattered in the warm earth of life. Women will gather them and hide them in their bosoms, breathing a more passionate tenderness perhaps, and betraying nothing to the outer world.

James Murchison and his wife had held each other’s hands more firmly, like those who approach a narrow mountain path. They were happy in their home life, happy with each other, and with their children. To the woman’s share there was added a new sacredness that woke and grew with every dawn. There were wounds to be healed, bitternesses to be warded off. The man who lay in her arms at night needed her more dearly, and there was exultation in the thought for her. She loved him the more for this stern thorn in the flesh. The pity of it seemed to make him more her own, to knit her tenderness more bravely round him, to fill life with a more sacred fire. She was not afraid of the future for his sake, believing him too strong to be vanquished by an ancestral sin.

It was one day in April when James Murchison came rattling over the Roxton cobbles in his motor-car, to slacken speed suddenly in Chapel Gate at the sight of a red Dutch bonnet, a green frock, and a pair of white-socked legs on the edge of the pavement. The Dutch bonnet belonged to his daughter Gwen, a flame-haired dame of four, demure and serious as any dowager. The child had a chip-basket full of daffodils in her hand, and she seemed quite alone, a most responsible young person.

A minute gloved hand had gone up with the gravity of a constable’s paw signalling a lawbreaker to stop. James Murchison steered to the footway, and regarded Miss Gwen with a surprised twinkle.

“Hallo, what are you doing here?”

Miss Gwen ignored the ungraceful familiarity of the inquisitive parent.

“I’ll drive home, daddy,” she said, calmly.

“Oh—you will! Where’s nurse?”

“Mending Jack’s stockings.” And the lady with the daffodils dismissed the question with contempt.

Murchison laughed, and helped the vagrant into the car.

“Shopping, I see,” he observed, refraining from adult priggery, and catching the spirit of Miss Gwen’s adventuresomeness.

“Yes. I came out by myself. I’d five pennies in my money-box. Nurse was so busy. The daffies are for mother.”

Her father had one eye on the child as he steered the car through the market-place and past St. Antonia’s into Lombard Street. The youth in him revolted from administering moral physic to Miss Gwen. Even the florist seemed to have treated her pennies with generous respect, and like the majority of sympathetic males, Murchison left the dogmatic formalities of education to his wife. The very flowers, the child’s offering, would have withered at any tactless chiding.

Mary, the darner of Mr. Jack’s stockings, was discovered waddling up Lombard Street with flat-footed haste. Miss Gwen greeted her with the composure of an empress, proud of her flowers, her father, the motor-car, and life in general. To Mary’s “Oh—Miss Gwen!” she answered with a sedate giggle and hugged her basket of flowers.

Murchison saw his wife’s figure framed between the white posts of the doorway. He chuckled as

he reached for his instrument bag under the seat, and caught a glimpse of Mary's outraged authority.

"Look, mother, look, you love daffies ever so much. I bought them all myself."

Catherine's arms were hugging the green frock.

"Gwen, you wicked one," and she caught her husband's eyes and blushed.

"We are growing old fast, Kate. I picked her up in Chapel Gate."

"The dear flowers; come, darling. Jack, you rascal, what are you doing?"

"Master Jack! Master Jack!"

Male mischief was astir also in Lombard Street, having emerged from the school-room with the much-tried Mary's darning-basket. There was an ironical humor in pelting the fat woman with the stockings she had mended and rolled so conscientiously. His father's appearance in the hall sent Master Jack laughing and squirming up the stairs. He was caught, tickled, and carried in bodily to lunch.

James Murchison was smoking in his study early the same afternoon, ticking off visits in his pocket-book, when his wife came to him with a letter in her hand.

"From Marley, dear. A man has just ridden in with it. They need you at once."

"Marley? Why, the Penningtons belong to Steel."

He tore open the envelope and glanced through the letter, while his wife looked whimsically at the chaos of books and papers on his desk. The ground was holy, and her tact debarred her from meddling with the muddle. The room still had a sense of shadow for her. She could not enter it without an indefinable sense of dread.

Murchison did not show the letter to his wife. He put it in his pocket, knocked out his pipe, and picked up his stethoscope that was lying on the table.

"I am afraid you will have to go to the Stantons' without me, dear," he said; "Steel wants me at Marley."

Catherine gave him a surprised flash of the eyes.

"Something serious?"

"Possibly."

"Parker Steel is not fond of asking your advice."

"Who is, dear?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I, dear," and he kissed her, and rang the bell to order out his car.

Marley was an old moated house some five miles from Roxton, a place that seemed stolen from a romance, save that there was nothing romantic about its inmates. A well-wooded park protected it from the high-road, the red walls rising warm and mellow behind the yews, junipers, and cedars that grew in the rambling garden. Spring flowers were binding the sleek, sun-streaked lawns with strands of color, dashes of crimson, of azure, and white, of golden daffodils blowing like banners amid a sheaf of spears. Here and there the lawns were purple with crocuses, and the singing of the birds seemed to turn the yew-trees into towers of song.

The panting of Murchison's car seemed to outrage the atmosphere of the place, as though the fierce and aggressive present were intruding upon the dreamy past. A manservant met the doctor, and led him across the Jacobean hall to the library, whose windows looked towards the west.

Parker Steel was standing before the fire, biting his black mustache. He had the appearance of a man whose vanity had been ruffled, and who was having an unwelcome consultation forced upon him by the preposterous fussing of some elderly relative.

The two men shook hands, Steel's white fingers limp in his rival's palm. His air of cultured hauteur had fallen to freezing point. He condescended, and made it a matter of dignity.

"Sorry to drag you over here, Murchison. Mr. Pennington has been on the fidget with regard to his daughter, and to appease him I elected to send for you at once."

Murchison warmed his hands before the fire. Steel's grandiloquent manner always amused him.

"I am glad to be of any use to you. Who is the patient, Miss Julia Pennington?"

"Yes."

"Anything serious?"

"Nothing; only hysteria; the woman's a tangle of nerves, a mass of emotions. I have grown to learn her idiosyncrasies in a year. One month it is palpitation—and imaginary heart disease, next month she is swearing that she has cancer of the œsophagus and cannot swallow. The lady has headaches regularly every other week, and merges on melancholia in the intervals."

Murchison nodded.

"What is the present phase?" he asked.

"Acute migraine and facial neuralgia. She is worrying about her eyes, seems to see nothing—and everything, mere hysterical phantasmagoria. The woman is not to be taken seriously. She is being drenched with bromide and fed upon phenacetin. Come and see her."

Parker Steel led the way from the library as though he regarded the consultation as a mere troublesome formality, a pandering to domestic officiousness that had to be appeased. Miss Julia Pennington was lying on a sofa in the drawing-room with a younger sister holding her hand. The room smelled horribly of vinegar, and the blinds were down, for the patient persisted that she could not bear the light.

The younger lady rose and bowed to Murchison, and drew aside, with her eyes fixed upon her sister's face. Miss Julia was moaning and whimpering on the sofa, a thin and neurotic spinster of forty with tightly drawn hair, sharp features, and the peevish expression of a creature who had long been the slave of a hundred imaginary ills.

Murchison sat down beside her, and asked whether she could bear the light. His manner was in acute contrast to Parker Steel's; the one incisive, almost brusque in his effort to impress; the other calm, quiet, deliberate, sympathetic in every word and gesture.

The younger Miss Pennington drew up the blinds. Murchison was questioning her sister,

watching her face keenly, while Parker Steel fidgeted to and fro before the fire.

"Much pain in the eyes, Miss Pennington?"

"Oh, Dr. Murchison, the pain is terrible, it runs all over the face; you cannot conceive—"

She broke away into a chaos of complaints till Murchison quieted her and asked a few simple questions. He rose, turned the sofa bodily towards the light, and proceeded to examine the lady's eyes.

"Things look dim to you?" he asked her, quietly.

"All in a blur, flashes of light, and spots like blood. I'm sure—"

"Yes, yes. You have never had anything quite like this before?"

"Never, never. I am quite unnerved, Dr. Murchison, and Dr. Steel won't believe half the things I tell him."

Her voice was peevish and irritable. Parker Steel grinned at the remark, and muttered "mad cat" under his breath.

"You are hardly kind to me, Miss Pennington," he said, aloud, with a touch of banter.

"I'm sure I'm ill, Dr. Steel, very ill—"

"Please lie quiet a moment," and Murchison bent over her, closed her lids, and felt the eyeballs with his fingers. Miss Pennington indulged in little gasps of pain, yet feeling mesmerized by the quiet earnestness of the man.

Murchison stood up suddenly, looking grave about the mouth.

"Do you mind ringing the bell, Steel? I want my bag out of the car."

Steel, who appeared vexed and restless despite his self-conceit, went out in person to fetch the bag. When he returned, Murchison had drawn the blinds and curtains so that the room was in complete darkness.

"Thanks; I want my lamp; here it is. I have matches. Now, Miss Pennington, do you think you can sit up in a chair for five minutes?"

The thin lady complained, protested, but obeyed him. Murchison seated himself before her, while Parker Steel held the lamp behind Miss Pennington. A beam of light from the mirror of Murchison's ophthalmoscope flashed upon the woman's face. She started hysterically, but seemed to feel the calming influence of Murchison's personality.

Complete silence held for some minutes, save for an occasional word from Murchison. Parker Steel's face was in the shadow. The hand that held the lamp quivered a little as he watched his rival's face. There was something in the concentrated earnestness of Murchison's examination that made Mrs. Betty's husband feel vaguely uncomfortable.

Murchison rose at last with a deep sigh, stood looking at Miss Pennington a moment, and then handed the ophthalmoscope to Steel. The lamp changed hands and the men places. Miss Pennington's supply of nerve power, however, was giving out. She blinked her eyes, put her hands to her face, and protested that she could bear the light from the mirror no longer.

Parker Steel lost patience.

"Come, Miss Pennington, come; I must insist—"

"I can't, I can't, the glare burns my eyes out."

"Nonsense, my dear lady, control yourself—"

His irritability reduced Miss Pennington to peevish tears. She called for her sister, and began to babble hysterically, an impossible subject.

Parker Steel pushed back his chair in a dudgeon.

"I can't see anything," he said; "utterly hopeless."

Murchison drew back the curtains and let dim daylight into the room. He helped Miss Pennington back to the sofa, very gentle with her, like a man bearing with the petulance of a sick child, and then turned to Steel with a slight frown.

"Shall we talk in the library?"

"Yes."

"I will just put my lamp away."

They crossed the hall together in silence, and entered the room with its irreproachable array of books, and the logs burning on the irons. Murchison went and stood by one of the windows. A red sunset was coloring the west, and the dark trees in the garden seemed fringed with flame.

Parker Steel had closed the door. He looked irritable and restless, a man jealous of his self-esteem.

"Well? Anything wrong?"

The big man turned with his hands in his trousers pockets. Steel did not like the serious expression of his face.

"Have you examined Miss Pennington's eyes?"

Parker Steel shifted from foot to foot.

"Well, no," he confessed, with an attempt at hauteur, "I know the woman's eccentricities. She may be slightly myopic—"

Murchison drew a deep breath.

"She may be stark blind in a week," he said, curtly.

"What!"

"Acute glaucoma."

"Acute glaucoma! Impossible!"

"I say it is."

Parker Steel took two sharp turns up and down the room. His mouth was twitching and he looked pale, like a man who has received a shock. He was conscious, too, that Murchison's eyes were upon him, and that his rival had caught him blundering like any careless boy. There was something final and convincing in Murchison's manner. Parker Steel hated him from that moment with the hate of a vain and ambitious egotist.

"Confound it, Murchison, are you sure of this?"

“Quite sure, as far as my skill serves me.”

“Have you had much experience?”

There was a slight sneer in the question, but Murchison was proof against the challenge.

“I specialized in London on the eyes.”

Parker Steel emitted a monosyllable that sounded remarkably like “damn.”

“Well, what’s to be done?”

“We must consider the advisability of an immediate iridectomy.”

They heard footsteps in the hall. The library door opened. A spectacled face appeared, to be followed by a long, loose-limbed body clothed in black.

“Good-day, Dr. Murchison. I have come to inquire—”

Parker Steel planted himself before the fire, a miniature Ajax ready to defy the domestic lightning. He cast a desperate and half-appealing look at Murchison.

“We have just seen your daughter, Mr. Pennington.”

A pair of keen gray eyes were scrutinizing the faces of the two doctors. Mr. Pennington was considered something of a terror in the neighborhood, a brusque, snappish old gentleman with a ragged beard, and ill-tempered wisps of hair straggling over his forehead.

“Well, gentlemen, your opinion?”

Murchison squared his shoulders, and seemed to be weighing every word he uttered. He was too generous a man to seize the chance of distinguishing himself at the expense of a rival.

“I think, Mr. Pennington, that Dr. Steel and I agree in the matter. We take, sir, rather a serious view of the case. Is not that so, Steel?”

The supercilious person bent stiffly at the hips.

“Certainly.”

“Perhaps, Steel, you will explain the urgency of the case.”

Mr. Pennington jerked into a chair, took off his spectacles and dabbed them with his handkerchief.

“I am sorry to have to tell you, sir, that your daughter’s eyesight is in danger.”

The gentleman in the chair started.

“What! Eyesight in danger! Bless my bones, why—”

“Dr. Murchison agrees with me, I believe.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good God, gentlemen!”

“A peculiarly dangerous condition, sir, developing rapidly and treacherously, as this rare disease sometimes does.”

Perspiration was standing out on Parker Steel’s forehead. He flashed a grateful yet savage glance at Murchison, and braced back his shoulders with a sigh of bitter relief.

“I think a London opinion would be advisable, Murchison, eh?”

“I think so, most certainly, in view of the operation that may have to be performed immediately.”

“Thank you, gentlemen, thank you. I presume this means my writing out a check for a hundred guineas.”

“Your daughter’s condition, sir—”

“Of course, of course. Don’t mention the expense. And you will manage—”

Parker Steel resumed his dictatorship.

“I will wire at once,” he said; “we must lose no time.”

He accompanied Murchison from the house, jerky and distraught in manner, a man laboring under a most unwelcome obligation. The rivals shook hands. There was much of the anger of the sunset in Parker Steel’s heart as he watched Murchison’s car go throbbing down the drive amid the slanting shadows of the silent trees.

CHAPTER V

Parker Steel’s wife, in a depressed and melancholy mood, wandered restlessly about the house in St. Antonia’s Square, with the chimes of St. Antonia’s thundering out every “quarter” over the sleepy town. Mrs. Betty had attended a drawing-room meeting that afternoon in support of the zenana missions, and such social mortifications, undertaken for the good of the “practice,” usually reduced her to utter gloom. Mrs. Betty was one of those cultured beings who suffer seriously from the effects of boredom. Her mercurial temper was easily lowered by the damp, gray skies of Roxton morality.

The tea was an infusion of tannin in the pot, and still the unregenerate male refused to return in time to save a second brew. Betty Steel had tried one of the latest novels, and guessed the end before she had read ten pages; she was an admirer of the ultra-psychological school, and preferred their bloodless and intricate verbiage to the simpler and more human “cry.” Even her favorite fog philosopher could not keep her quiet in her chair. The desire for activity stirred in her; it was useless to sit still and court the mopes.

Betty Steel went up-stairs to her bedroom, looked through her jewel-box, folded up a couple of silk blouses in tissue paper, rearranged her hair, and found herself more bored than ever. After drifting about aimlessly for a while, she climbed to the second floor landing, and entered a room that looked out on St. Antonia’s and the square. A tall, brass-topped fender closed the fireless grate. There were pictures from the Christmas numbers of magazines upon the walls, and rows of old books and toys on the shelves beside the chimney. In one corner stood a bassinet hung with faded pink satin. The room seemed very gray and silent, as though it lacked something, and waited for the spark of life.

Mrs. Betty looked at the toys and books; they had belonged to her these twenty years, and she

had thought to watch them torn and broken by a baby's hands. Parker Steel's wife had borne him no children. Strange, cultured egotist that she was, it had been a great grief to her, this barrenness, this sealing of the heart. Betty was woman enough despite her psychology to feel the instincts of the sex piteous within her. A mother in desire, she still kept the room as she had planned it after her marriage, and so spoken of it as "the nursery," hoping yet to see it tenanted.

Feeling depressed and restless, she went to the window and looked out. Clouds that had been flushed with transient crimson in the east, were paling before the grayness of the approaching night. On the topmost branch of an elm-tree a thrush was singing gloriously, and the traceried windows of the church were flashing back the gold of the western sky.

Parker Steel's wife saw something that made her lips tighten as she stood looking across the square. Two children were loitering on the footway, the boy rattling the railings with his stick, the girl tucking up a doll in a miniature mail-cart. They were waiting for a tall woman in a green coat, faced with white, who had stopped to speak to a laborer whose arm was in a sling.

The boy ran back and began dragging at the woman's hand.

"Mummy, mummy, come along, do."

"Good-day, Wilson, I am so glad you are getting on well."

The workman touched his cap, and watched Mrs. Murchison hustled away impulsively by her two children. The thrush had ceased singing, silenced by the clatter of Mr. Jack's stick. Betty Steel was leaning against the shutter and watching the mother and her children with a feeling of bitter resentment in her heart. Even in her home-life this woman seemed to vanquish her. Catherine Murchison was taking her children's hands, while Betty Steel stood alone in the darkening emptiness of the "nursery."

Perhaps the rushing up of simpler, deeper impulses made her hurry from the room when she saw her husband's carriage stop before the house. He was the one living thing that she could call her own, and this pale-faced and cynical woman felt very lonely for the moment and conscious of the dusk. Parker Steel had signalized his return by a savage slamming of the heavy door. Betty met him in the hall. She went and kissed him, and hung near him almost tenderly as she helped him off with his fur-lined coat.

"You poor thing, how late you are!"

Her husband growled, as though he were in no mood for a woman's fussing.

"I should like some tea."

"Of course, dear; you look tired."

"Hurry it up, I'm busy."

And he marched into the dining-room, leaving Betty standing in the hall.

The warmer impulses of the moment flickered and died in the wife's heart. Her eyes had been tender, her mouth soft, and even lovable. The slight shock of the man's preoccupied coldness drove her back to the unemotional monotony of life. Husbands were unsympathetic creatures. She had read the fact in books as a girl, and had proved it long ago in the person of Parker Steel.

"What is the matter, dear, you look worried?"

Her husband was battering at the sulky fire as though the action relieved his feelings.

"Oh, nothing," and he kept his back to her.

Mrs. Betty rang the bell for fresh tea.

"What a surly dog you are, Parker."

"Surly!"

"Yes."

"Confound it, can't you see that I'm dead tired? You women always want to talk."

Betty Steel looked at him curiously, and spoke to the maid who was waiting at the door.

"I always know, Parker, when you have lost a patient," she drawled, calmly, when the girl had gone.

"Who said anything about losing patients?"

"Have you quarrelled with old Pennington?"

"Well, if you must know," and he snapped it out at her with a vicious grin; "I've made an infernal ass of myself over at Marley."

His wife's most saving virtue was that she rarely lost control either of her tongue or of her temper. She could on occasion display the discretion of an angel, and smile down a snub with a beatific simplicity that made her seem like a child out of a convent. She busied herself with making her husband's tea, and chatted on general topics for fully three minutes before referring to the affair at Marley.

"You generally exaggerate your sins, Parker," she said, cheerfully.

"Do I? Damn that Pennington woman and her humbugging hysterics."

Mrs. Betty studied him keenly.

"Is Miss Julia really and truly ill for once?"

"I have just wired for Campbell of 'Nathaniel's'."

"Indeed!"

"The idiot's eyesight is in danger. Old Pennington got worried about her, and insisted on a consultation."

Betty cut her husband some cake.

"So you have sent for Campbell?"

"I had Murchison first."

"Parker!"

"The fellow spotted the thing. I hadn't even looked at the woman's eyes. Nice for me, wasn't it?"

Betty Steel's face had changed in an instant, as though her husband had confessed bankruptcy or fraud. The sleek and complacent optimism vanished from her manner; her voice lost its drawl, and became sharp and almost fierce.

"What did Murchison do?"

“Do!” And Parker Steel laughed with an unpleasant twitching of the nostrils. “Bluffed like a hero, and helped me through.”

Mrs. Betty’s bosom heaved.

“So you are at Murchison’s mercy?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Parker, I almost hate you.”

“My dear girl!”

“And that woman, of course he will tell her.”

“Who?”

“Kate Murchison.”

“No one ever accused Kate Murchison of being a gossip.”

“She will have the laugh of us, that is what makes me mad.”

Betty Steel pushed her chair back from the table, and went and leaned against the mantel-piece. She was white and furious, she who rarely showed her passions. All the vixen was awake in her, the spite of a proud woman who pictures the sneer on a rival’s face.

“Parker!” And her voice sounded hard and metallic.

“Well, dear.”

“You love Murchison for this, I suppose?”

Steel gulped down his tea and laughed.

“Not much,” he confessed.

“Parker, we must remember this. Lie quiet a while, and take the fool’s kindnesses. Our turn will come some day.”

“My dear girl, what are you driving at?”

“The Murchisons are our enemies, Parker. I will show this Kate woman some day that her husband is not without a flaw.”

The great Sir Thomas Campbell arrived that night at Roxton, and was driven over to Marley in Steel’s brougham. The specialist confirmed the private practitioner’s diagnosis, complimented him gracefully in Mr. Pennington’s presence, and elected to operate on the lady forthwith. Parker Steel’s mustache boasted a more jaunty twist when he returned home that night after driving Sir Thomas Campbell to the station. He had despatched a reliable nurse to attend to Miss Julia at Marley, and felt that his reputation was weathering the storm without the loss of a single twig.

As for James Murchison, he kept his own council and said never a word. Even doctors are human, and Murchison remembered many a mild blunder of his own. He received a note in due course from Parker Steel, thanking him formally for services rendered, and informing him that the operation had been eminently successful. Murchison tore up the letter, and thought no more of the matter for many months. Work was pressing heavily on his shoulders with influenza and measles epidemic in the town, and he had his own “dragon of evil” to battle with in the secret arena of his heart.

Gossip is like the wind, every man or woman hears the sound thereof without troubling to discover whence it comes or whither it blows. The details of Miss Julia Pennington’s illness had been wafted half across the county in less than a week. Nothing seems to inspire the tongues of garrulous elderly ladies more than the particulars of some particular gory and luscious slashing of a fellow-creature’s flesh. Miss Pennington’s ordeal had been delicate and almost bloodless, but there were vague and dramatic mutterings in many Roxton side streets, and gusts of gossip whistling through many a keyhole.

It was at a “Church Restoration” *conversazione* at Canon Stensly’s that Mrs. Steel’s ears were first opened to the tittle-tattle of the town. The month was May, and the respectable and genteel Roxtonians had been turned loose in the Canon’s garden. Mrs. Betty chanced to be sitting under the shelter of a row of cypresses, chatting to Miss Gerraty, a partisan of the Steel faction, when she heard voices on the other side of the trees. The promenaders, whosoever they were, were discussing Miss Pennington’s illness, and the tenor of their remarks was not flattering to Parker Steel. Mrs. Betty reddened under her picture-hat. The thought was instant in her that Catherine Murchison had betrayed the truth, and set the tongues of Roxton wagging.

Half an hour later the two women met on the stretch of grass outside the drawing-room windows. A casual observer would have imagined them to be the most Christian and courteous of acquaintances. Mrs. Betty was smiling in her rival’s face, though her heart seethed like a mill-pool.

“What a lovely day! I always admire the Canon’s spring flowers. Did you absorb all that the architectural gentleman gave us with regard to the value of flying buttresses in resisting the outward thrust of the church roof?”

“I am afraid I did not listen.”

“Nor did I. Technical jargon always bores me. So we are to have a bazaar; that is more to the point, so far as the frivolous element is concerned. I have not seen Dr. Murchison yet; is he with you?”

Catherine was looking at Mrs. Betty’s pale and refined face. She did not like the woman, but was much too warm-hearted to betray her feelings.

“No, my husband is too busy.”

“Of course. Measles in the slums, I hear. Is it true that you are taking an assistant.”

Catherine opened her eyes a little at the faint flavor of insolence in the speech.

“Yes, my husband finds the work too heavy.”

“I sympathize with you. Dr. Steel never would take club and dispensary work; not worth his while, you know; he is worked to death as it is. The curse of popularity, I tell him. How are the children? I hear the younger looks very frail and delicate.”

Mrs. Steel’s condescension was cunningly conveyed by her refined drawl. Catherine colored slightly, her pride repelled by the suave assumption of patronage Parker Steel’s wife adopted.

“Gwen is very well,” she said, curtly.

“Ah, one hears so much gossip. Roxton is full of tattlers. I am often astonished by the strange tales I hear.”

She flashed a smiling yet eloquent look into her rival’s eyes, and was rewarded by the sudden rush of color that spread over Catherine Murchison’s face. Mrs. Betty exulted inwardly. The shaft had flown true, she thought, and had transfixed the conscience of the originator of the Pennington scandal.

“Please remember me to your husband, Mrs. Murchison,” and she passed on with a glitter of the eyes and a graceful lifting of the chin, feeling that she had challenged her rival and seen her quail.

But Catherine was thinking of that frosty night in March when she had found her husband drink drugged in his study.

CHAPTER VI

A doctor’s life is not lightly to be envied. Like a traveller in a half-barbarous country, he must be prepared for all emergencies, trusting to his own mother-wit and the resourcefulness of his manhood. He may be challenged from cock-crow until midnight to do battle with every physical ill that affects humanity on earth, and to act as arbiter between life and death. The common functions of existence are hardly granted him; he is a species of supramundane creature to whom sleep and food are scarcely considered vital. However critical the strain, he must never slacken, never show temper when pestered by the old women of the sick-room, never lose the suggestion of sympathy. People will run to catch him “at his dinner-hour,” poor wretch, and drag him from bed to discover that some fat old gentleman has eaten too much crab. Of all men he must appear the most infallible, the most assured and resolute of philosophers. He walks on the edge of a precipice, for the glory of a thousand triumphs may be swallowed up in the blunder of a day.

The responsibilities of such a life are heavy, and may be said to increase with the sensitiveness of the practitioner’s conscience. The man of heart and of ideals will give out more of the vital essence than the mere intellectual who works like a marvellous machine. Yet, flow of soul is necessary to true success in the higher spheres of the healing art. There is a vast difference between the mere chemist who mixes tinctures in a bottle, and the psychologist whose personality suggests the cure that he wishes to complete.

James Murchison was a practitioner of the higher type, a man who wrestled Jacob-like with problems, and took his responsibilities to heart. He was no clever automaton, no perfunctory juggler with the woes and sufferings of his fellows. Life touched him at every turn, and there was none of the cynical adroitness of the mere materialist about Murchison. He worked both with his heart and with his head, a man whose mingled strength and humility made him beloved by those who knew him best.

The winter’s work had been unusually heavy, and the burden of it had not lightened with the spring. Murchison enjoyed the grappling of difficulties, that keen tautness of the intellect that vibrates to necessity. Strong as he was, the strain of the winter’s work had told on him, and his wife, ever watchful, had seen that he was spending himself too fast. Interminable night work, the rush of the crowded hours, and hurried meals, grind down the toughest constitution. Murchison was not a man to confess easily to exhaustion, possessing the true tenacity of the Saxon, the spirit that will not realize the nearness of defeat. It was only by constant pleading that Catherine persuaded him to consider the wisdom of hiring help. Sleeplessness, the worker’s warning, had troubled her husband as the spring drew on.

One Wednesday evening in May, Murchison came home dead tired and faint for want of food. The day had been rough and stormy, a keen wind whirling the rain in gray sheets across the country, beating the bloom from the apple-trees, and laying Miss Gwen’s proud tulips in red ruin along the borders. Murchison’s visiting-list would have appalled a man of frailer energy and resolution. The climbing of interminable stairs, the feeling of pulses, and all the accurate minutes of the craft, the interviewing of anxious relatives, slave work in the slums! A premature maternity case had complicated the routine. Murchison looked white and almost hunted when he sat down at last to dinner.

Catherine dismissed the maid and waited on him in person.

“Thanks, dear, this is very sweet of you.”

She bent over him and kissed him on the forehead.

“You look tired to death.”

“Not quite that, dear; I have been rushed off my legs and the flesh is human.”

“Crocker will send a suitable man down in a day or two. He can take the club work off your hands. You have finished for to-night?”

He lay back in his chair, the lines of strain smoothed from his face a little, the driven look less evident in his eyes.

“Only a consultation or two, I hope. I shall get to bed early. Ah, coffee, that is good!”

Catherine played and sang to him in the drawing-room after dinner, with the lamp turned low and a brave fire burning on the hearth. Murchison had run up-stairs to kiss his children, and was lying full length on the sofa when the “detestable bell” broke in upon a slumber song. The inevitable message marred the relaxation of the man’s mind and body, and the tired slave of sick humanity found himself doomed to a night’s watching.

“What is it, dear?”

He had read the note that the maid had brought him.

“No peace for the wicked!” and he almost groaned; “a maternity case. Confound the woman, she might have left me a night’s rest!”

His wife looked anxious, worried for him in her heart.

“How absolutely hateful! Can’t Hicks act for you to-night?”

“No, dear, I promised my services.”

“Will it take long?”

“A first case—all night, probably.”

He got up wearily, threw the letter into the fire, and going to his study took up his obstetric bag and examined it to see that he had all he needed. Catherine was waiting for him with his coat and scarf, wishing for the moment that the Deity had arranged otherwise for the bringing of children into the world.

“Shall you walk?” she asked.

“Yes, it is only Carter Street. Go to bed, dear, don’t wait up.”

She kissed him, and let her head rest for a moment on his shoulder.

“I wish I could do the work for you, dear.”

He laughed, a tired laugh, looking dearly at her, and went out into the dark.

A vague restlessness took possession of Catherine that night, when she was left alone in the silent house. She had sent the servants to bed, and drawing a chair before the fire, tried to forget herself in the pages of romance. Color and passion had no glamour for her in print, however. It was as though some silent watcher stood behind her chair, and willed her to brood on thoughts that troubled her heart.

She put the book aside at last, and sat staring at the fire, listening to the wind that moaned and sobbed about the house. The curtains swayed before the windows, and she could hear the elm-trees in the garden groaning as though weary of the day’s unrest. There was something in the nature of the night that gave a sombre setting to her thoughts. She remembered her husband’s tired and jaded face, and her very loneliness enhanced her melancholy.

The Dutch clock in the hall struck eleven, the antique whir of wheels sounding strange in the sleeping house. Catherine stirred the fire together, rose and put out the lamp. She lit her candle in the hall, leaving a light burning there, and climbed the stairs slowly to her room. Instinct led her to cross the landing and enter the nursery where her children slept.

The two little beds stood one in either corner beside the fireplace, each headed by some favorite picture, and covered with red quilts edged with white. Gwen was sleeping with a doll beside her, her hair tied up with a blue ribbon. The boy had a box of soldiers on the bed, and one fist cuddled a brass cannon.

Catherine stood and looked at them with a mother’s tenderness in her eyes. They spelled life to her—these little ones, flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone. They were her husband’s children, and they seemed to bring into her heart that night a deep rush of tenderness towards the man who had given her motherhood. All the joy and sorrow that they had shared together stole up like the odor of a sacrifice.

“When the strength’s out of a man, the devil’s in.”

She remembered those words he had spoken, and shuddered. Was it prophetic, this voice that came to her out of the deeps of her own heart? Tenderly, wistfully, she bent over each sleeping child, and stole a kiss from the land of dreams. Betty Steel’s speech recurred to her as she passed to her own room, feeling lonely because the arms she yearned for would not hold her close that night.

Catherine went to bed, but she did not sleep. Her brain seemed clear as a starlit sky, the thoughts floating through it like frail clouds over the moon. She heard the wind wailing, the rain splashing against the windows, the slow voice of the hall clock measuring out the hours. Some unseen power seemed to keep her wakeful and afraid, restless in her loneliness, listening for the sound of her husband’s return.

The clock struck five before she heard the jar of a closing door. Footsteps crossed the hall, and she heard some one moving in the room below. For some minutes she sat listening in bed, waiting to hear her husband’s step upon the stairs. Her heart beat strangely when he did not come; the room felt cold to her as she shivered and listened.

A sudden, vague dread seized her. She slipped out of bed, lit the candle with trembling hands, and throwing her dressing-gown round her, went out on to the landing. The lamp was still burning in the hall, and the door of the dining-room stood ajar. Shading the candle behind her hand, she went silently down the stairs into the hall. The only sound she heard was the clink of a glass.

“James, husband!”

Catherine stood on the threshold, her hair loose about her, the candle quivering in her hand. For the moment there was an agony of reproach upon her face. Then she had swayed forward, snatched something from the table, and broke it upon the floor.

“My God, Kate, forgive me!”

He sank down into a chair and buried his head in his arms upon the table. Catherine bent over him, her hands resting on his shoulders.

“Oh, my beloved, I had dreaded this.”

He groaned.

“Miserable beast that I am!”

“No, no, you are tired, you are not yourself. Come with me, come with me, lie in my arms—and rest.”

He turned and buried his face in the warmth of her bosom.

“Thank God you were awake,” he said.

CHAPTER VII

Roxton, that little red town under a June sky, looked like a ruby strung upon the silver thread of

a river and set in a green hollow of the hills. As yet the enterprising builder had not stamped the mark of the beast glaringly upon the place, and the quaint outreachings of the town were suffered to dwindle through its orchards into the June meadows, where the deep grass was slashed and webbed with gold. The hills above were black with pine thickets that took fire with many a dawn and sunset, and to the north great beech-woods hung like purple clouds across the blue.

The most miserly of mortals might have warmed with the ridge view from Marley Down. Southward a violet haze of hills, larch-woods golden spired in glimmering green valleys, bluff knolls massive with many oaks, waving fields, blue smoke from a few scattered cottages. From Marley Down with its purple heather billowing between the pine woods like some Tyrian sea, the road curled to the red town sleeping amid its meadows.

Mrs. Betty Steel was at least an æsthetician, and her eyes roved pleasurably over the woods and valleys as she drove in her smart dog-cart over Marley Down. She had been ridding her conscience of a number of belated country “calls” with a friend, Miss Gerratty, beside her, a plump little person in a pink frock. There was a certain cottage on Marley Down that Betty Steel had coveted for months, an antique gem, oak panelled, brick floored, with great brown beams across the ceilings. Betty Steel had the woman’s greed for the possession of pretty things. The house in St. Antonia’s Square seemed too large and cumbersome for her at times. Perhaps it was something of a mausoleum, holding the ashes of a dead desire. Often she wearied of it and the endless domestic details, and longed for some nook where her restless individualism could live in its own atmosphere.

A glazier was tinkering at one of the cottage casements when Mrs. Betty drove up the grass track between sheets of glowing gorse. A pine wood backed the cottage on the west; in front, before the little lawn, a white fence linked up two banks of towering cypresses. Mrs. Betty drew rein before the gate, and called to the man who was releading the casement frames.

“I hear the cottage is to let. Can you tell me where Mr. Pilgrim, the owner, lives. Somewhere on the Down, is it not?”

The man, an unpretentious, wet-nosed creature, crossed the grass plot, wiping his hands on a dirty apron.

“Mr. Pilgrim’s just ’ad an offer, miss.”

“Has he?”

“Well, we’re doin’ the repairs. I ’ave ’eard that Mrs. Murchison of Roxton ’ave taken it.”

“Dr. Murchison’s wife?”

The man nodded.

“How utterly vexatious. I suppose Mr. Pilgrim would not sell?”

“Don’t know, miss, I ’ain’t the authority to say.”

Parker Steel’s wife flicked her horse up with the whip and turned back to the main road, a woman with a grievance. Her companion in pink offered sympathy with a twitter. Being of the Steel faction, she was wise as to the friction between the households, and a friend’s grievance has always an element of wickedness for a woman.

“How very annoying, dear!”

Mrs. Betty waved her whip.

“I have had that cottage in mind for over a year. Some one must have told the selfish wretch that I was after it.”

“Strangely like spite, dear,” cooed the dove in pink.

“I wonder what the Murchisons want with the place? To make a summer beer-garden for their brats, perhaps.”

“Marley Down’s so bracing. I hear Jim Murchison has been overworking himself. Probably he intends spending his week-ends here.”

“Rather curious.”

Miss Gerratty’s blue eyes were too shallow for the holding of a mystery.

“I can’t see anything strange in it, Betty. Jim Murchison has that assistant of his, a finnicking little fellow in glasses, with a neck like a giraffe’s. Strange that they should have snapped up your particular cottage.”

“Oh, that’s just like Kate Murchison,” and Mrs. Betty’s brown eyes sparkled.

Hatred, like love, is a transfiguration of trifles, and nothing is too paltry to be registered against a foe. Parker Steel’s wife drove home in the most unenviable of tempers, untouched by the scent of the bean-fields in bloom, or by the flash of the river through the green of June. She rattled down the steep hill into Roxton town at a pace that made Miss Gerratty wince. Metaphorically, Betty Steel would have given much to have had her bit in Catherine Murchison’s mouth, and to have treated her to a taste of her nimble whip.

Leaving Miss Gerratty at the end of Queen’s Walk by the old Jacobean Market-House, Mrs. Steel drove home alone, to find some half-dozen letters waiting for her, the mid-day post that she had missed by lunching with Mrs. Feveril, of The Cedars. She shuffled the letters irritably through her hands like a pack of cards, her eyes sparkling into sudden vivacity as a foreign envelope showed among the rest. The letter bore the Egyptian Sphinx and pyramids, and the familiar writing of a friend.

The letter lay unopened in her lap awhile, as she sat by the open window of the drawing-room and looked out over the beds that were gorgeous with the flare of Oriental poppies. The lawn, studded with standard roses, swept to the trailing branches of an Indian cedar. Rhododendrons were still in bloom in the little shrubbery under the rich green shade shed by two great oaks.

She tore open the envelope at last, having lingered like one who shirks the reading of news long waited for. The familiar squirl of the man’s handwriting made her smile, bringing back memories of a first serious *affaire de cœur* with the quaint grotesqueness of the foolish past. She remembered the thin, raw-boned youth with the red mouth and the strenuous eyes who had kissed her one night after a river-party. He was still vivid to her, even to the recollection how his boating-shirt had slipped a button and given her a glimpse of a hairy chest. What a little fool she had been in those

days! Mrs. Betty was not the slave of sentiment, and Surgeon-Major Shackleton had slipped with his somewhat strenuous love-making into the past. She still had occasional letters from him, and from other sundry friends, letters that she always showed her husband. Parker Steel was not a jealous being. He was mildly pleased by the conviction that he was still envied in secret by a bevy of old rivals.

"Dear Betty,—"

Mrs. Steel made a little grimace as she pictured the number of "dear Betties" who had probably drifted within the sphere of Charlie Shackleton's passion for romance. She skipped through the letter with watchful eyes, ignoring the surgeon-major's bantering persiflage, the familiar gibes of an old friend. It was on the fourth page that she unearthed the news she delved for, tangled beneath the splutterings of an execrable pen.

> "I think you asked me in your last letter whether I knew a fellow named Murchison at St. Peter's. Haven't you mentioned 'the creature' to me before? I remember Jim Murchison just as you describe him, a solid, brown-faced six-footer, one of those happy-go-lucky beggars who seem ready to punch creation. I left the place two years before he qualified; he had brains, but if my pate serves me, he was the sworn slave of a drug we catalogue as C_2H_5OH. Not a bad sort of fool, but bibulous as blotting-paper. Funny he should have turned up your way, and married Kate of the golden hair. Mark this private, and let my friend Parker deal with the above formula. Glad to hear that he is raking in the guineas—"

The letter ended with a few personal paragraphs that Mrs. Betty hardly troubled to read. She crossed the hall to her husband's study, hunted out a text-book on chemistry from the shelves, and proceeded with much patience and deliberation to unearth the scientific hieroglyph the surgeon-major's letter contained. She found it at last, and smiled maliciously at its vulgar triteness.

"C_2H_5OH, ethyl alcohol; commonly known as alcohol; a generic term for certain compounds which are the hydroxides of hydrocarbon radicals. The active principle of intoxicating liquors."

Mrs. Betty put the book back on the shelf, and buttoned Mr. Shackleton's letter into her blouse. There was a queer glitter in her eyes, a spiteful sparkle of satisfaction. She went back to the drawing-room, and seating herself at the piano, played Mendelssohn's "Spring Song" with fine verve and feeling.

Her husband found her in a brilliant mood that night at dinner. She looked sleek and handsome, blood in her cheeks and mischief in her eyes. Mrs. Betty at her best could be a very inflammatory and sensuous creature, like a Greek nymph taken from some Bacchic vase.

"The latest news, Parker—the Murchisons have snapped up my cottage on Marley Down."

"The dickens they have! You don't appear jealous."

"No, I have a forgiving heart. The place is like a hermitage. What can the Murchisons want with such a cottage?"

Her husband, cold intellectualist, warmed to her beauty as to true Falernian.

"Am I a crystal gazer?"

"Read me the riddle."

Parker Steel laughed, and looked at her with a slight loosening of the mouth.

"Riddle-de-dee! You women are always analyzing imaginary motives. Murchison has been looking run to death, lean as an overdriven horse. I don't blame him for wishing to munch his oats in rustic seclusion."

Mrs. Betty bubbled over with sparkles of intuition.

"What does C_2H_5OH stand for, Parker?"

"C_2H_5OH! What on earth have you to do with chemical formulæ?"

"Answer my question."

"Gin, if you like; the stuff the blue-ribbonites battle with."

CHAPTER VIII

Porteus Carmagee, the lawyer, and his sister lived in Lombard Street, in a grim, blind-eyed, stuccoed house with laurels in tubs before it, and chains and posts defending an arid stretch of shingle. There was something about the house that suggested law, a dry and close-mouthed look that was wholly on the surface. Porteus Carmagee was a little man, who forever seemed spluttering and fuming under some grievance. He was hardly to be met without an irritable explosion against his own physical afflictions, the delinquencies of tradesmen and Radicals, or the sins of the boy who brought the morning paper. The lawyer's almost truculent attitude towards the world was largely the result of "liver"; his sourness was on the surface; one glimpse of him cutting capers with Kate Murchison's children would dissipate the notion that he was a cadaverous and crusty hater of mankind.

Miss Phyllis Carmagee was remarkable for the utter unfitness of her Christian name, and for the divine placidity that contrasted with her brother's waspishness. A big, moon-faced, ponderous woman, she was a rock of composure, a species of human banyan-tree under whose blessed branches a hundred fretful mortals might rest in the shade. Her detractors, and they were few, asserted that she was a mere mass of amiable and phlegmatic fat. Miss Carmagee was blessed with a very happy sense of humor; she had a will of her own, a will that was formidable by reason of its stubborn inertia when once it had come to rest.

Some six years had passed since Miss Carmagee had deposited herself as a supporter of James

Murchison on his professional platform. Her pleasant stolidity had done him service, for Miss Carmagee impressed her convictions on people by sitting down with the serene look of one who never argues. She was a woman who stated her opinions with a buxom frankness, and who sat on opposition as though it were a cushion. She was perhaps the only woman who gave no sparks to the flint of Mrs. Steel's aggressive vivacity. Miss Carmagee's placidity was unassailable. To attack her was like throwing pease against a pyramid.

"Well, my dear, so you have furnished the cottage."

She lay back contentedly in her basket-chair—chairs were the few things that nourished grievances against her—and beamed on Catherine Murchison, who sat shaded by the leaves of a young lime. The tea-table stood between them. Miss Carmagee liked basking in the sun like some sleek, fat spaniel.

"It is such a dear little place." And the young wife's eyes were full of tenderness. "I want James to keep the gray hairs from coming too fast. I shall lure him away to Marley Down, one day in seven, if I can."

"Of course, my dear, you can persuade him."

"Jim has such an obstinate conscience. He gives his best to people, and naturally they overwork him. We have rivals, too, to consider. I know that Betty Steel is jealous of us, but then—"

A touch of wistfulness on Catherine's face brought Miss Carmagee's optimism to the rescue.

"You need not fear the Steels, my dear."

"No, perhaps not."

"Many people—I, for one—don't trust them. The woman is too thin to be sincere," and Miss Carmagee's bust protested the fact.

"Betty's kind enough in her way."

"When she gets her way, my dear. But tell me about the cottage. Are the drains quite safe, and are there plenty of cupboards?"

Catherine was launched into multitudinous details—the staining of floors, the choosing of tapestries, the latest bargains in old furniture. It eased her to talk to this placid woman, for, despite her courage, her heart was sad in her and full of forebodings for her husband. The truth had become as a girdle of thorns about her, worn both day and night. She bore the smart of it without a flicker of the lids, and carried her head bravely before the world.

The strip of garden, with its prim and old-fashioned atmosphere, was invaded abruptly by the rising generation. There was a flutter of feet round the laurel hedge bordering the path to the front gate, and Mr. Porteus pranced into view, a veritable light-opera lawyer with youth at either elbow.

"Hello, godma! may I have some strawberries?"

Master Jack Murchison plumped himself emphatically into Miss Carmagee's lap, oblivious of the fact that he was sitting on her spectacles.

"Jack, dear, you must not be so rough."

Mr. Porteus crossed the grass with the more dignified and less voracious Dutch bonnet beside him. Miss Gwen and the bachelor always treated each other with a species of stately yet twinkling civility. The lawyer's wrinkles turned into smile wreaths in the child's presence, and there was less perking up of his critical eyebrows.

"Here's a handful for you, Kate; I was ambuscaded and captured round the corner. Who said strawberries? Will Miss Gwendolen Murchison deign to deprive the blackbirds of a few?"

"Do you grow stawberries for the blackbirds, godpa?"

"Do I, Miss Innocent! No, not exactly."

Catherine had removed her son and heir from Miss Carmagee's lap. The fat lady looked cheerful and unperturbed. Master Jack was suffered to ruffle her best skirts with impunity.

"Don't let them eat too much, Porteus."

Her brother cocked a birdlike eye at Miss Gwen.

"Sixpence for the biggest strawberry brought back unnibbled. Off with you. And don't trample on the plants, John Murchison, Esq."

The pair raced for the fruit-garden, Master Jack's enthusiasm rendering him oblivious to the crime of taking precedence of a lady. Gwen relinquished the van to him, and dropped to a demure toddle. Her brother's flashing legs suggested the thought to her that it was undignified to be greedy.

"Pardon me, Kate, I think you are wanted over the way."

Mr. Carmagee's sudden soberness of manner brought the color to Catherine's cheeks. The lawyer was rattling the keys in his pocket, and blinking irritably at space. Intuition warned her that he was more concerned than he desired her to imagine. She rose instantly, as though her thoughts were already in her home.

"Good-bye; you will excuse me—"

She bent over Miss Carmagee and kissed her, her heart beating fast under the silks of her blouse.

"I'll bring the youngsters over presently, Kate."

"Thank you so much."

"And send some fruit with them."

"You are always spoiling us."

And Porteus Carmagee accompanied her to the gate.

The lawyer rejoined his sister under the lime-tree, biting at his gray mustache, and still rattling the keys in his trousers pocket. He walked with a certain jerkiness that was peculiar to him, the spasmodic and irritable habit of a man whose nerve-force seemed out of proportion to his body.

"Murchison's an ass—a damned ass," and he flashed a look over his shoulder in the direction of the fruit-garden.

Familiarity had accustomed Miss Carmagee to her brother's forcible methods of expression. He detonated over the most trivial topics, and the stout lady took the splutterings of his indignation as

a matter of course.

"Well?" and she examined her bent spectacles forgivingly.

"Murchison's been overworking himself."

"So Kate told me."

"The man's a fool."

"A conscientious fool, Porteus."

Mr. Carmagee sniffed, and expelled a sigh through his mustache.

"I've warned him over and over again. Idiot! He'll break down. They had to bring him home in a cab from Mill Lane half an hour ago."

His sister's face betrayed unusual animation.

"What is the matter?"

"Heat stroke, or fainting fit. I saw the cab at the door, and collared the youngsters as they were coming round the corner with the nurse. Poor little beggars. I shall tell Murchison he's an infernal fool unless he takes two months' rest."

Miss Carmagee knew where her brother's heart lay. He generally abused his friends when he was most in earnest for their salvation.

"Kate will persuade him, Porteus."

"The woman's a treasure. The man ought to consider her and the children before he addles himself for a lot of thankless and exacting sluts. Conscience! Conscience be damned. Why, only last week the man must sit up half the night with a sweep's child that had diphtheria. Conscience! I call it nonsense."

Miss Carmagee smiled like the moon coming from behind a cloud.

"You approve of Parker Steel's methods?"

"That little snob!" and the lawyer's coat-tails gave an expressive flick.

"James Murchison only wants rest. Leave him to Kate; wives are the best physicians often."

Mr. Carmagee's keys applauded the remark.

"Taken a cottage on Marley Down, have they?"

"Yes."

"I'll recommend a renewal of the honeymoon. Hallo, here comes the sunlight."

Mr. Porteus romped across the grass to poke his wrinkled face into the oval of the Dutch bonnet.

"Hallo, who says senna to-night? What! Miss Gwendolen Murchison approves of senna!"

"I've won that sixpence, godpa."

"Indeed, sir, I think not."

"Jack can have the sixpence; it's his buffday to-morrow."

"A lady who likes senna and renounces sixpences! Go to, Master John, you must run to Mr. Parsons, the clockmaker, and buy godma a pair of new spectacles."

"Spectacles!" and Master Jack mouthed his scorn.

"A sad day for us, Miss Carmagee, when babies sit upon our infirmities!"

Parker Steel dropped into his Roxton tailor's that same afternoon to have a summer suit fitted. The proprietor, an urbane and bald-headed person with the deportment of a diplomat, rubbed his hands and remarked that professional duties must be very exacting in the heat of June.

"Your colleague, I understand, sir—Dr. Murchison, sir—has had an attack from overwork; sunstroke, they say."

"What! Sunstroke?"

"So I have been informed, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Or an attack of faintness. Dr. Murchison is a most laborious worker. Four buttons, thank you; a breast-pocket, as before, certainly. Any fancy vestings to-day, doctor? No! Greatly obliged, sir, I'm sure," and the diplomat dodged to the door and swung it open with a bow.

Parker Steel found his wife reading under the Indian cedar in the garden. She was dressed in white, with a red rose in her bosom, the green shadows of the trees and shrubs about her casting a sleek sheen over her olive face and dusky hair. Poets might have written odes to her, hailing the slim sweetness of her womanliness, using the lily as a symbol of her beauty and the Madonna-like radiance of her spiritual face.

She glanced up at her husband as he came spruce and complacent, like any Agag, over the grass.

"Murchison has had a sunstroke."

"What! Who told you?"

"Rudyard, the tailor."

The book was lying deprecatingly at Mrs. Betty's feet. Her eyes swept from her husband to dwell reflectively on the scarlet pomp of the Oriental poppies.

"Do you think it was a sunstroke, Parker?"

Her husband glanced at his neat boots and whistled.

"What a melodramatic mind you have," he said.

CHAPTER IX

James Murchison's motor-car drew up before a row of buildings in Mill Lane, a series of brick boxes that were flattered with the name of "Prospect Cottages." So far as prospect was concerned, the back yard of a tannery offered no "patches of purple" to the front windows of the row, and the breath that blew therefrom had no kinship to a land breeze from the Coromandel coast. In blunt Saxon, Mill Lane stank, and with the whole-heartedness of a mediæval alley. Over the gray cobbles that dipped between the houses to the river came a glimpse of the foam and glitter of the mill pool

and the dull thunder of the wheels and water hummed perpetually up the narrow street.

Murchison swung open the gate, and in three strides stood at the blistered door of No. 9 Prospect Row. A painted board hung beside the door bearing a smoking chimney “proper,” and for supporters two bundles of sweep’s brushes that looked wondrous like Roman fasces. The letter-press advertised Mr. William Bains as a sweeper of chimneys, soot merchant, and extinguisher of fires. The little front garden was neat as a good housewife’s linen cupboard, with double daisies along the borders, and nasturtiums, claret, crimson, and gold, scrambling up pea-sticks below the window.

A stout woman, who smelled of soup, opened the door to Murchison and welcomed him with the most robust good-will.

“Good-morning, doctor; hope I ’aven’t kept you waiting. Step in, sir, if you please.”

Murchison stepped in, bending his head by force of habit, as though accustomed to cottage doorways. Mrs. Bains in a starched apron made way for him like a ship in sail. She was a very capable woman, so said her neighbors, black-eyed, sturdy, with a nose of the retroussé type, and patches of color over her rather prominent cheek-bones.

“You’re looking better, doctor, excuse me saying it. I can tell you you gave us a bit of a shock when you went off in that there dead faint on Tuesday.”

Mrs. Bains was a woman with a sanguine temper, a temper that made her an aggressive enemy, but a very loyal and active friend. Her black eyes twinkled with motherly concern as she watched Murchison pull off his gloves and stuff them into his hat.

“They tell me that I have been working too hard,” he said, with a smile.

“Lor’, sir, you do work; you don’t do your cooking with no pepper. I was taking it to myself, sir, the power of worry we’ve give you over the child.”

“A good fight is worth winning, Mrs. Bains. I am proud of the victory.”

“And I reckon none else would ’a’ done it, and so says the neighbors. Will you step up-stairs, sir? Don’t mind my man, he’s just scrubbing the soot off ’im.”

A pair of huge fore-arms, a gray flannel shirt, and a red face covered with soap-suds saluted Murchison from the steaming copper in the scullery.

“Good-mornin’, sir; ’ope you’re well.”

“Better, Bains, thanks. Washing the war-paint off, eh?”

“That’s it, sir,” and the sweep grinned good-will and sturdy admiration; “the kid’s doing fine, I hear.”

“Could not be better, Bains.”

“I reckon you’ve done us a rare good turn, sir.”

Murchison’s eyes smiled at the man’s words.

“I’m glad we won,” he said; “a child’s life is worth fighting for.”

“It be, sir, it be,” and the sweep swished the soap-suds from his face till it shone like the sun brightening from behind a cloud.

Murchison climbed the stairs to the front bedroom, a room liberally decorated with cheap china and colored texts. The patient, a little girl, christened Pretoria by her patriotic parents, lay on the bed beneath the window. The satiny whiteness of the child’s skin contrasted with the cherry-pink night-gown that she wore. It had been a case of diphtheria, a case that would probably have ended in disaster before the days of serum. Murchison had sat up half one night, doubtful whether he would not have to tracheotomize the child.

“Hallo, Babs, how’s that naughty throat?”

He sat down on the edge of the bed and chatted boyishly to Pretoria, whose shy eyes surveyed him with a species of delighted adoration. The hero worship that children give to men is pathetic in its ideal trustfulness.

“I’m better, thank you, sir.”

“That’s right; you are beginning to know all about it, eh? Tongue fine and red. She’ll be a talker, Mrs. Bains. Taking her milk well, yes. Keep her lying down.”

Mrs. Bains’s big, red hands were fidgeting under her white apron.

“Begging your pardon, doctor, but the child’s been a-bothering me since you called last, to know whether she mayn’t give you some flowers.”

Mrs. Bains reached across the bed to where a cheap mug on the window-sill held a posy of pink daisies.

“They’re just common things,” said the sweep’s wife, with an apologetic smile.

The child’s hand went out, and there was a slight quivering of the bloodless lips.

“For the doctor, with Pretoria’s love.”

Murchison took the flowers tenderly in his strong, deft hand.

“Who’s spoiling me, I should like to know? Aren’t they beauties? Supposing I put two in my button-hole? Thank you, little one,” and he bent and kissed the child’s forehead.

“You won’t drop ’em in the street, sir?”

The pathetic touch of unconscious cynicism went to the man’s heart.

“What, lose my flowers! You wait, miss, to see whether I don’t wear some of them to-morrow.”

The little white face beamed.

“You’re that kind to humor the kid, sir,” quoth Mrs. Bains, with feeling, as she followed Murchison down the stairs.

An hour later Mr. William Bains was hanging his clean face over the garden fence as an example to the neighbors, when a smart victoria stopped at the upper end of Mill Lane. A dapper gentleman sprang out, and came quickly down the footway as though the reek of the tannery disgusted his polite nostrils. He glanced right and left with stiff-necked dissatisfaction, his sleek, fashionable figure reminding one of some aristocratic fragment of Sheraton plumped down amid battered oddments in some dealer’s shop.

Mr. William Bains scanned him, and grunted, noting the effeminate sag of the shoulders and the

glint of the patent-leather boots. There was a certain insolent gentility in the dapper figure that made the man of the brawny fore-arms feel an instinctive and workman-like contempt.

"Can you inform me where a Mrs. Randle lives?"

The sweep caught the white of Dr. Steel's left eye, and jerked his pipe-stem laconically at the next cottage down the lane.

"No. 10."

"Obliged," and Parker Steel passed on.

Five minutes later the door of No. 10 Prospect Row was clapped snappishly on the doctor's heels. It opened again when the smart physician had regained his carriage and driven off. A thin woman, with an old cloth cap perched on her mud-colored hair, came out bare-elbowed. Her face warned Mr. Bains of the fact that she was the possessor of a grievance.

"See the gent come along?"

The sweep nodded.

"Sort of kid-gloved gentleman that makes a respectable woman think of this 'ere charity as an insult. Mrs. Gibbins sent him to see my Tom. I'm thinking she might as well mind 'er business."

Mr. Bains cocked his pipe and chuckled.

"Dr. Steel's one of the smart 'uns," he said.

"Toff! I'd like to give 'im toffee! Comes into my 'ouse with 'is 'at on, and looks round 'im as though 'e was afraid to touch the floor with 'is boots. Sh'ld 'ear 'im talk, just as though 'is voice 'adn't any stomach in it. I told 'im we had Murchison, Mrs. Gibbins or no Mrs. Gibbins. 'E looked me over as though I was a savage, and said, 'Haw, yes, Dr. Murchison 'as all the parish cases, I believe.' 'And a good job, sir,' says I. Lor', I wouldn't as much as scrub 'is dirty linen."

Mr. Bains fingered his chin and sucked peacefully at his pipe.

"I likes brawn in a man," he said, "and a big voice, and a bit of spark in th' eye."

"Don't give me any of yer 'trousers stretchers' or yer fancy weskits—Murchison's my man."

"Grit, blessed grit to the bone of 'im."

"And a real gentleman. Takes 'is 'at off in a 'ouse. T'other chap 'ain't no manners."

It is a cheap age, and cheap sentiment satisfies the masses, a mere matter of melodrama in which the villain is hissed and the "stage child" applauded when she points to heaven and invokes "Gawd" through her cockney nose. Sentiment in the more delicate phases may be either the refinement of hypocrisy or the shining out of the godliness in man. The trivial incidents of life may betray the true character more finely than the throes of a moral crisis. The average male might have dropped Miss Pretoria's flowers round the nearest corner, or thrown them into his study grate to wither amid cigar ends and burned matches. James Murchison kept the flowers and gave them to his wife.

"Put them in water, dear, for me."

"From a lady, sir?" and Catherine's eyes searched the lines upon his face. She was jealous for his health, but her eyes were smiling. Dearest of all virtues in a woman are a brave cheerfulness and a tactful tongue.

Her husband kissed her, and it was a lover's kiss.

"A thank-offering, dear, from the Bains child."

"How sweet! Somehow I always treasure a child's gift; it seems so fresh and real."

"Poor little beggar," and he smiled as he spoke. "I wouldn't have lost that life, Kate, for a very great deal. It was something to feel that fellow Bains's hand-grip when I told him we had won."

Catherine was settling the flowers in a glass bowl.

"It was just a bit of life, dear," she said.

"Yes, it is life that tells. I think I would rather have saved that child, Kate, than have written the most brilliant book."

She turned to him and put her arms about his neck.

"That is the true man in you," and her eyes honored him.

"You dear one."

"Kiss me."

Marriage had been no problem play for these two.

Catherine lay thinking that night, with her hair in tawny waves upon the pillow, waiting for her husband to come to bed. She was happier and less troubled at heart than she had been for many weeks. The strain had lessened for her husband with the summer, and he seemed his more breezy, strenuous self, a great child with his children, a man who appeared to have no dark corners in the house of life. Wilful optimist that she was, she could not conceive it possible that a mere "inherited lust" could bear down the man whose strength and honor were bound up for her in her religion. Where great love exists, great faith lives also. Catherine was too ready, perhaps, to forget her fears, to regard them as mere thunder-clouds, black for the hour, but destitute of heavier dread. She ascribed his momentary weakness to the brain strain of the winter's work. The words that had terrified her in Porteus Carmagee's garden had proved but a fantasy, for a trick of the heart had explained the incident and given the denial to Mrs. Betty's insinuations. The ordeal need never be repeated, so she told herself. Murchison could be saved from overwork. The assistant he had engaged was a youngster of tact and education.

Love will stand trustfully through the storm, under a tree, braving the lightning; nor had Catherine realized how vivid his own frailty appeared to the man she loved. He was sitting alone in his study while she comforted herself with dreams in the room above, his head between his hands, his heart heavy in him for the moment. An inherited habit is never to be despised. The gods of old were prone to mortal weakness in the flesh, and no man is so masterful that he can command his own destiny unshaken. We are what the world and our ancestors have made us. The individual hand is there to hold the tiller, but even a Ulysses must meet the storm.

Murchison turned his tired face towards the light, heaved back his shoulders, and sighed like a man in pain. He rose, put out the lamp, locked the study door, and taking his candle went up to his

dressing-room that looked out on the garden. The blind was up, the window open, the darkness of space afire with many stars. He stood awhile at the open window in deep thought, letting the night breeze play upon his face. He was glad of his home life, glad that a woman's arms were waiting for him, ready to shelter him from himself. He thanked God, as a strong man thanks God, for blessings given. The breath of his home was sweet to him, its life full of tenderness and good.

His wife's bedroom had an air of delicacy and refinement with its cherished antique furniture, its linen curtains flowered with red, the paper and carpet a rich green. Candles in brass sticks were burning on the dressing-table, where a silver toilet-set—brushes, mirror, combs, and pin-boxes—recalled to the wife her marriage day. There were books—red, green, and white—on a copper-bound book-shelf over the mantel-piece. The room suggested that those who slept in it had kept the romance of life untarnished and unbedraggled. There was no slovenly realism to hint at apathy or the materialism of desire.

"Have you been reading, dear?"

"Yes, reading."

Murchison was not a man who could act what he did not feel. He looked at his wife's face on the pillow, and wondered at the beauty of her hair.

"It is good to see you there, Kate," he said.

The unrestrainable wistfulness of his look made her arms flash out to him. He knelt down beside the bed and let her fondle him with her hands.

"You regret nothing, dear?"

"Regret!"

"It is always in my mind—this curse. I am not a coward, Kate, but I go in deadly fear at times of my own flesh."

"Always—this!"

"Would to God I could bear it all myself."

"Come," and she hung over him; "I understand, I am not afraid. You must rest; we will go away together to the cottage—a little honeymoon. You are not yourself as yet. Oh, my beloved, I want you here, here—at my heart!"

Darkness enveloped them, and she pillowed her husband's head upon her shoulder. He heard her heart beating, heard the drawing of her breath. In a little while he fell asleep, but Catherine lay awake for many hours, her love hovering like some sacred flame of fire over the tired man at her side.

CHAPTER X

A white-capped servant came running across Lombard Street from Mr. Carmagee's, and hailed Murchison's chauffeur, who had just swung the car to the edge of the footway outside the doctor's house. The white streamers of the maid's apron were fluttering jauntily in the wind. Some weeks ago the chauffeur had discovered the fact that the lawyer's parlor-maid had an attractive simper.

"Good-day, miss; can I oblige a lady?"

"Mr. Carmagee wants to know whether the doctor and the missus are going to Marley Down this afternoon?"

"Yes, straight away. I'm waiting for 'em to finish tea."

"You're to step over to Mr. Carmagee's garden door at once."

"Thank you. And who's to mind the car?"

"It won't catch cold," and the maid showed her dimples for a bachelor's benefit.

The chauffeur crossed the road with her, and was met at the green gate in the garden by Mr. Porteus himself. A hamper lay on the gravel-path at the lawyer's feet, with straw protruding from under the lid. Mr. Carmagee twinkled, and gave the man a shilling.

"Stow this in the car, Gage; you've room, I suppose."

"Plenty, sir."

"Don't say anything about it to your master. Just a little surprise, a good liver-tonic, Gage—see?"

The man grinned, touched his cap, and, picking up the hamper, recrossed the street. He packed Mr. Carmagee's offering away with the light luggage at the back of the car, and after grimacing at the maid, who was still watching him from the garden door, busied himself with polishing the lamps.

"Good-bye, darling, good-bye. Be a good boy, Jack, and do what Mary tells you."

Catherine was bending over her two children in the hall, a light dust cloak round her, a white veil over her summer hat. Miss Gwen, looking a little pensive and inclined to weep, hugged her mother with a pair of very chubby arms. Master Jack was more militant, and inclined to insist upon his rights.

"Oh, I say, mother, I don't call it fair!"

"You shall come next week, dear."

"Gage says he'll teach me to drive. I'll come next week. You've promised now—you know."

Catherine kissed him, and laughed like a young bride when her husband came up and lifted the youngster off his feet.

"Who wants to boss creation, eh?"

Master John clapped his heels together.

"It's no fun with old Mary, father."

"You must learn to be a philosopher, my man."

"I'm going to buy a busting big pea-shooter at Smith's," quoth the heckler, meaningly, as he regained the floor.

Murchison caught his daughter up in his strong arms.

“Good-bye, my Gwen—”

“Dood-bye, father.”

“No tears, little sunlight. What is it, a secret?—well.”

The child was whispering in his ear. Murchison listened, fatherly amusement shining in his eyes.

“I put ’em in muvver’s bag.”

“All right. I’ll see to it.”

“They’re boofy; I tried one, jus’ one.”

Murchison laughed, and hugged the child.

“What a wicked fay it is! You shall come with us next time. We’ll have tea in the woods, stir up ant-heaps, and play at Swiss Family Robinson. Good-bye,” and he carried her with him to the door to take her child’s kiss as the sunlight touched her hair.

Summer on Marley Down was a pageant such as painter’s love. Heather everywhere, lagoons of purple amid the rich green reefs of the rising bracken. Scotch firs towering into mystery against the blue, roofing magic aisles where shadows played on grass like velvet, bluff banks and forest valleys, heather and whortleberry tangling the ground. In the marshy hollows of the down the moss was as some rich carpet from the Orient, gold, green, and bronze. Asphodel grew in these rank green hollows, with the red whorls of the sundew, and the swinging sedge. Everywhere a broad, breezy sky, brilliant with color above a brilliant world.

The palings of the cottage-garden glimmered white between the sombre cypresses, and the dark swell of the fir-wood topped the red of the tiled roof. This nook in Arcady had the charm of a surprise for Murchison, for Catherine had made him promise that he would leave the stewardship to her. She had spent many an hour over at Marley Down, and her year’s allowance from her mother had gone in art fabrics, carpets, and old furniture. Catherine had taken Gwen with her more than once, having sworn the child to secrecy on these solemn motherly trifles, and Gwen had hidden her bubbling enthusiasm even from her father.

“Here we are! Is it not a corner of romance?”

“The place looks lovely, dear.”

“Wait!” and she seemed happily mysterious.

“I can guess your magic. Carry the luggage in, Gage; Dr. Inglis may want you for an hour or two at home.”

He gave his hand to Catherine, and together they passed into the little garden. Murchison looked about him like a man who had put the grim world out of his heart. The peacefulness of the place seemed part of the woodland and the sky. Purple clematis was in bloom, with a white rose over the porch. The beds below the windows were fragrant with sweet herbs, lavender and thyme, rosemary and sage. A crimson rambler blazed up nearly to the overhanging eaves, and there were rows of lilies, milk white, beneath the cypress-trees.

Within, a woman’s careful and happy tenderness welcomed him everywhere. A dozen nooks and corners betrayed where Catherine’s hands had been at work. Flowered curtains at the casements; simple pottery, richly colored, on the window shelves; his favorite books; a great lounge-chair for him before an open window. The place was a dream cottage, brown beamed, brown floored, its walls tinted with delicate greens and reds, old panelling beside the red brick hearths, beauty and quaintness everywhere, flowers in the garden, flowers in the quiet room.

“What a haven of rest!”

He stood in the little drawing-room, looking about him with an expression of deep contentment on his face. Catherine knew that his heart thanked her, and that her simple idyl was complete.

He turned and put his arm across her shoulders.

“You have worked hard, dear.”

“Have I?” and she laughed and colored.

“It is all good. I am wondering whether I deserve so much.”

Her happy silence denied the thought.

“Your spirit is in the place, Kate.”

“My heart, perhaps,” she answered.

He bent and kissed her, and drew from her with smiling mouth as they heard the man Gage come plodding down the stairs.

He stopped at the door and touched his cap.

“All in, sir. I’ve put your bag in what the old lady told me was your dressing-room.”

“Thanks, Gage.”

“Any message to Dr. Inglis, sir?”

“Oh, ask him to call at Mrs. Purvis’s in Carter Street; I forgot to put her on the list.”

“Right, sir,” and they heard the clash of the garden gate; then the panting of the car, and the plaintive wail of the “oil horse” as it got in gear.

“Out—old world,” and Murchison swept his wife towards the piano; “give me a song, Kate.”

“Now?” and her eyes were radiant.

“Yes, I shall remember the first song you sing to me in this dear place.”

Catherine had gone to her room, when Murchison stumbled on the hamper that Porteus Carmagee had given the man Gage to carry in the car. The fellow had set it down in the little hall, between an oak settle and a table that held a bowl of roses by the door. Murchison imagined that his wife had been investing in china or antiques. A letter was tucked under the cord, and, looking closer, he recognized his own name and the lawyer’s scrawl, the “qualifications” added with a humorous flourish of Mr. Carmagee’s pen.

Murchison sat on the oak settle, opened the envelope, and drew out the paper with its familiar crest.

“My dear Fellow,—Being a hearty admirer of your wife’s management of your health, I, a ridiculous bachelor, presume to afflict you with medicine of my own, gratis. I send you half

a dozen bottles of Martinez's 1887, as good a port as you will find in any cellar. I know that you are an abstemious beggar, but take the stuff for the tonic it is, and drink to an 'incomparable' wife's health. The wine has purpled me out of the gray dumps on many an occasion. Not that you will need it, sir, for such a disease. Chivalry forbid! Yours ever,

"Porteus Carmagee."

"P. S.—Gage is smuggling this over for me in the car."

Murchison read the letter through as though this eccentric but lovable gentleman had written to bully him on behalf of some injured client. Six bottles of Martinez's 1887, plumped by this dear old blunderer into Kate's haven of refuge! Had Murchison believed in the personal existence of the devil, he would have imagined that the Spirit of Evil had bewitched the innocent heart of Mr. Porteus Carmagee. Good God! what a frail fool he was that such a thing should have the least significance for him! James Murchison scared by a drug in a bottle! And yet the first impulse that he had was to dash the hamper on the floor, and watch the red juice dye the stones.

He heard his wife singing in her room above, singing with that tender yet subdued abandonment that goes with a happy heart. He heard the door open, her footstep on the landing.

"James, dear."

He started as though guilty, and crumpled the letter in his hand.

"Yes."

"Would you like supper now, and a walk later? There will be a moon."

"Let us have supper," he answered back.

"I will come in a minute. Have you seen the sunset? It is grand over the heath."

She went back into her bedroom, humming some old song, her very happiness hurting the man's heart. What was this lust, this appetite, this thirst in the blood, that it should make him the creature of such a chance? Had he not free will, the self-respecting strength of his own manhood? Strange irony of life that six bottles of choice wine should typify the father's sins visited upon the children! A scientific platitude! And yet the thought was pitiful to him, pitiful that the spiritual beauty of a woman's love could be challenged by such a pathetic thing as this. He had grappled and thrown the passion time on time, and yet it had slunk away to come grinning back to him with open mouth and burning eyes.

He was still sitting on the settle with the letter crumpled in his hand, when Catherine called to him again from her bedroom.

"Do look at the sky, dear, it is wonderful."

His wife's innocent happiness stung him with its unconscious pathos. She had conceived this Eden for him, and lo—the serpent was amid the flowers her hands had gathered. He roused himself, picked up the hamper by the cord, and carried it into the little dining-room beyond the hall. Ignorance was bliss for her; knowledge would dash her joyous confidence in a moment. There was no need for her to know; he felt sure of himself, safe with her in such a place. Looking round him a moment, he pushed the hamper under the deep window-seat, where it was hidden by the drapings. Poor Porteus, how little he thought that an asp lurked under the leaves of the vine!

A full moon was rising in the east when husband and wife went out into the garden. The glimmering witchery of the night bathed the world in silent splendor. From the cottage the broad swell of the heathland rolled back under the sky to where a forest of firs rose like distant peaks against the moon. Mists, white and ghostly, were rising in the meadows of the plain, vistas of woodland, vague and mysterious, shining up through the gathering vapor. In the garden the scent of the lilies mingled with the old world sweetness of the herbs. The flowers stood white before the cypresses, and the dew was falling.

Not a sound save the distant baying of a dog. Murchison opened the little gate to the path that wound amid the gorse and heather. The turmoil and clamor of the world seemed far from them under the moonlit sky; the breath of the night was cool and fragrant.

Catherine's head was on her husband's shoulder, his arm about her body. She leaned her weight on him with the happy instinct of a woman, her face white towards the moon, her eyes full of the light thereof.

"Eight years," she said, as though speaking her inmost thoughts.

"Eight years!" and he echoed her.

"Do you remember that night at Weybourne? It was just such a night as this."

His arm tightened about her.

"Memories are like books," he said, "a few live in our hearts through life, the rest, like the bills we pay, are read, and then forgotten."

"You were very nervous." And she laughed, alluringly.

"I can remember stammering."

"And how you held my wrist?"

"Like that," and he proved that he had not forgotten.

They wandered on for a while in silence, looking towards the fir-woods whose spires were touched by the light of the moon.

"I hope the children are asleep."

"And that poor Mary has not been blinded by your son's propensity for blowing pease."

"Jack will be like you, dear."

"Poor child, he might do better."

He spoke lightly, caught up self-consciousness, and sighed. His wife's eyes looked swiftly at his face.

"You feel that you can rest here, dear?"

"With you, yes."

She felt the pressure of his hand, and saw his mouth harden, his brows contract a little. The

subject saddened him, brought back the introspective mood, and recalled the darker past. Catherine broke from it instinctively, knowing that it was poor comfort to let him brood.

"To-morrow—"

"What are your plans?"

"Shall we walk to Farley church?"

"Yes, I love the old place, the cedars and yews shading the graves. It has repose—poetry."

His mind recoiled on happier things. Catherine felt it, and was comforted.

"I often went to Farley as a child."

"The memory suits you, dear. I can see a little, golden-headed woman sitting in the sunlight in one of those black old pews."

"I was like our Gwen, but more noisy."

"Gwen cannot do better than repeat her mother."

The moon sailed high over Marley Down when husband and wife returned to the cottage. The old village woman whom Catherine had hired had lit the lamp in the small drawing-room, and the warm glow flooded through the casement upon the flowers and the dew-drenched grass. Catherine wandered to the piano, her husband lying in the chair before the open window. She played and sang to him, the old songs she had sung when they had been betrothed.

She rose at last, and, bending over him, put her arms about his neck, while his hands held hers.

"I am going to bed."

"Dustman, eh?"

"And you?"

He looked through the window at the black sweep of the heath and the stars above it.

"I shall sit up awhile, dear, and do some work."

"Work, traitor!"

He glanced up at her with a smile.

"I brought a ledger over with me. No time like the sweet and idle present. There are such things as bills, dear."

Catherine brushed the commonplace aside with a woman's adroitness.

"Well, an hour's exile, and no more."

"I promise that."

"Good-night, till you come—"

She kissed him, glided away, and went up to her room, humming one of Schubert's songs.

CHAPTER XI

Murchison sat for a while before the open window after his wife had gone to bed. He could hear her moving to and fro in the room above him, the only sound in the silence of the night. He was at rest, and happy, her very nearness filling him with a sense of peace and strength. The tenderness of her love breathed in the air, and he still seemed to hear her radiant singing.

We mortals are often in greater peril of a fall when we trust in the cheerful temerity of an imagined strength. To a man standing upon the edge of a precipice the lands beneath seem faint and insignificant, and yet but a depth of air lies between him and the plain. Our frailties may seem pitiful, nay, impossible to us when we listen to noble music, or watch the sunrise on the mountains. The man who is exalted in the spirit lives in a clearer atmosphere, and wonders at the fog that may have drifted round him yesterday. He may even laugh at the *alter ego* framed of clay, and ask whether this soft-bodied, cringing thing could ever have answered to the name of "self."

Some such feeling of optimism took possession of Murchison that night. The words of his wife's songs were in his brain; he heard her moving in the room above, and felt the dearness of her presence in the place. Everywhere he beheld the work of her hands—the curtains at the windows, the flowers in the bowls. Her photograph stood on the mantel-shelf, and he rose and looked at it, smiling at the eyes that smiled at him. Could he, the husband of such a woman, and the father of her children, be the mere creature of the juice of the grape? Was he no stronger than some sot at a street corner? He gazed at his own photograph that stood before the mirror, gazed at it critically, as though studying a strange face. The eyes looked straight at him, the mouth was firm, the jaw crossed by a deep shadow that betrayed no degenerate sloping of the chin. Was this the face of a man who was the victim of a lust? He smiled at the memory of his weaker self as a man smiles at a rival whom he can magnanimously pity.

The pride of strength suggested the thought of proof. Old Porteus Carmagee had sent him this choice wine, and was he afraid of six bottles in a basket? Why not challenge this *alter ego*, this mean and treacherous caricature of his manhood, and prove in the grapple that he was the master of his earthly self? There was a combative stimulus in the thought that appealed to a man who had been an athlete. It fired the element of action in him, made him knit his muscles and expand his chest.

Murchison looked at himself steadily in the mirror, held up his hand, and saw not the slightest tremor. He crossed the hall, entered the dining-room, and dragged the hamper from under the window-seat with something of the spirit of a Greek hero dragging some classic monster from its lair. Coolly and without flurry he carried the thing into the drawing-room and set it down on the little gate-legged table. He cut the cord, raised the lid, and let the musty fragrance of the lawyer's cellar float out into the room. The simile of Pandora's box did not occur to him. He put the straw aside, and pulled out a cobwebbed bottle from its case. His knife served him to break up the cork; he sniffed the wine's bouquet, and looked round him for a glass.

He found one among Catherine's curios, an old Venetian goblet of quaint shape. Half filling it, he tossed Porteus Carmagee's letter on to the straw, and standing before his wife's portrait, looked

steadily into the smiling eyes.

"Kate, I drink to you. One glass to prove it, and the open bottle left untouched."

Deliberately he raised the glass and drank, looking at his wife's face in its framing of silver on the mantel-shelf.

More than two hours had passed since she had left him, and Catherine was lying awake, watching the moonlight glimmering on the moor. Her heart was tranquil in her, her thoughts free from all unrest as she lay in the oak bed, happily lethargic, waiting for her husband's step upon the stairs. The day had been very sweet to her, and there was no shadow across the moon. She lay thinking of her children, and her childhood, and of the near past, when she had first sung the songs that she had sung to the man that night.

The crash of broken glass and the sound of some heavy body falling startled Catherine from her land of dreams. She sat up, listening, like one roused from a first sleep. Murchison must have turned out the lamp and then blundered against some piece of furniture in the dark. If it were her treasured and much-sought china! She slipped out of bed, opened the door, and went out on to the landing.

"James, what is it?"

The narrow hall lay dark below her, and she won no answer from her husband.

"Are you hurt, dear?"

Still no reply; the door was shut.

"James, what has happened?"

She crept down the stairs, and stepped on the last step. A curious, "gaggling" laugh came from the room across the hall. At the sound she stiffened, one hand holding the bosom of her laced night-gear, the other gripping the oak rail. A sudden blind dread smote her till she seemed conscious of nothing save the dark.

"James, are you coming?"

Again she heard that mockery of a laugh, and a kind of senseless jabbering like the babbling of a drunken man. A rush of anguish caught her heart, the anguish of one who feels the horror of the stifling sea. She tottered, groped her way back into her room, and sank down on the bed in an agony of defeat. Was it for this that her love had spent itself in all the tender planning of this little place? How had it happened? Not with deceit! Even in her blindness she prayed to God that he had not wounded her with willing hand.

"Oh, God, not that, not that!"

She rose, catching her breath in short, sharp spasms, shaking back the hair from off her shoulders. The torture was too sharp with her for tears. It was a wringing of the heart, a dashing of all devotion, a falling away of happiness from beneath her feet! She stretched out her arms in the dark like a woman who reaches out to a love just dead.

Catherine turned, saw the empty bed, and the white face of the moon. The memories of the evening rushed back on her, wistful and infinitely tender. "No, no, no!" Her heart beat out the contradiction like a bell. It was unbelievable, unimaginable, that he should have played the hypocrite that night. They had spoken of the children, their children, and would he have lied to her, knowing that this vile devil's drug was in the house? Her heart cried out against the thought. Her love came forth like an angel with a burning sword.

With white hands trembling in the moonlight, Catherine lit her candle, slipped her bare feet into her shoes, and went down the stairs. The inarticulate and pitiable mumbling still came from the little room. In the hall she halted, irresolute, the candle wavering in her hand. The shame of it, the pity of it! Could she go in and see the "animal" stammering in triumph over the "man"? No, no, it would be desecration, ignominy, an unhallowed wounding of the heart. He would sleep presently. The madness would flicker down like fire and die. Yes, she would wait and watch till he had fallen asleep. To see him in the throes of it, no, she could not suffer that!

With a dry sob in the throat, Catherine set the candle down on the table, beside the bowl of roses that she had arranged but yesterday with her own hands. How cold the house was, even for summer! She returned to her bedroom, took down her dressing-gown from behind the door, and wrapped it round her, thanking Heaven in her heart that she was alone with her husband in the house. The village woman slept away, and came at seven in the morning. She had all the night before her to recover her husband from his shame.

Going down to the hall again, she walked to and fro, listening from time to time at the closed door. The restless babbling of the voice had ceased. The fumes were dulling the wine fire in his brain. She prayed fervently that he would fall asleep.

An hour passed, and she heard no sound save the sighing of her own breath. For a moment the pathos of it overcame her as she leaned against the wall, the child in her crying out for comfort, for she felt alone in the emptiness of the night. The weakness lasted but a second. She grappled herself, opened the door noiselessly and looked in.

The lamp was still burning in the room, its shade of crocus yellow tempering the light into an atmosphere of mellow gold. On the gate-legged table stood Porteus Carmagee's ill-omened hamper, the lid open, and straw scattered about the floor. Fragments of broken glass glittered among the litter, with the twisted stem of the Venetian goblet. An empty bottle had trackled its lees in a dark blot on the green of the carpet.

Catherine would not look at her husband for the moment. She was conscious of a shrunken and huddled figure, a red and gaping face, the reek of the wine, the heavy sighing of his breath. Her nerve had returned to her with the opening of the closed door. Her heart knew but one great yearning, the prayer that the downfall had not been deliberately cruel.

A sheet of note paper lay crumbled amid the straw. She stooped and reached for it, and recognized the writing. It was Porteus Carmagee's half-jesting letter, and she learned the truth,

how the fatal stuff had come.

"I know that you are an abstemious beggar, but take the stuff for the tonic it is, and drink to an 'incomparable' wife's health. . . . Gage is smuggling this over for me in the car."

She stood holding the letter in her two hands, and looking at the senseless figure on the floor. Love triumphed in that ordeal of the night. There was nothing but pity and great tenderness in her eyes.

"Thank God!" and she caught her breath; "thank God, you did not do this wilfully! Oh, my beloved, if I had known!"

CHAPTER XII

The surest test of a man's efficiency is to leave him in a responsible post with nothing to trust to save his own skill and courage. Young doctors, like raw soldiers, are prone to panic, and your theoretical genius may bungle over the slitting of a whitlow, though he be the possessor of numberless degrees.

Mere book lore never instilled virility into a man, and Frederick Inglis, B.A., A.M., B.Sc., D.Ph., gilded to the last button with the cleverness of the schools, was an amiable fellow whose cultured and finnicking exterior covered unhappy voids of self-distrust. It had been very well for him so long as he could play with a few new drugs, look quietly clever, and leave the grimness of the responsibility to Murchison. Dr. Inglis had found private practice a pleasant pastime. He had come from the laboratories full to the brim with the latest scientific sensations, and a preconceived pity for the average sawbones in the provinces. He boasted a brilliant air so long as he was second in command. It was possible to pose behind the barrier of another man's strength.

That same Saturday night Murchison's highly educated assistant had been dragged out of bed at two in the morning, and taken in a bumping milk-cart to a farm some five miles north of Roxton. His youth had been flouted on the very threshold by a stern, keen-eyed woman who had expressed herself dissatisfied with the offer of a juvenile opinion. Dr. Inglis had blushed, and rallied his dignity. Dr. Murchison had intrusted the practice to him; what more could a mere farmer's wife desire?

Above, in a big bed, Dr. Inglis discovered a fat man writhing with what appeared to be a prosaic and violent colic. A simple case, perhaps, to the lay understanding, but abdominal diagnosis may be a nightmare to a surgeon. It is like feeling for a pea through the thickness of a pillow.

Two straight-backed, hard-faced, and very awesome ladies stood at the bottom of the bed and watched Dr. Inglis with sceptical alertness. The assistant fumbled, stammered, and looked hot. The women exchanged glances. A man's personal fitness is soon gauged in a sick-room.

"Well, doctor, what's your opinion?"

The challenge was given with a tilt of the nose and a somewhat suggestive sniff.

"Abdominal colic, madam. The pain is often very violent."

"Ah, eh, and what may abdominal colic be due to?"

Dr. Inglis bridled at the tone, and attempted the part of Zeus.

"Many causes, very many causes. Mr. Baxter has never had such an attack before, I presume."

"Never."

"Yes—how are you feeling, sir?"

"Bad, mighty bad," came the voice from the feather pillows.

The two austere women seemed to grow taller and more aggressive.

"Do you think you understand the case, doctor?"

"Madam!"

"I wish Dr. Murchison had come himself; my husband has such faith in him."

Dr. Inglis grew hot with noble indignation.

"Just as you please," he said, with hauteur, yet looking awed by the tall women beside the bed. "My qualifications are as good as any man's in Roxton."

The conceit failed before those two hard and Calvinistic faces.

"I believe in experience, sir; no offence to you."

"Then you wish me to send for Dr. Murchison?"

"I do."

And the theoretical youth experienced guilty relief despite the insult to his age and dignity.

Sunday morning came with a flood of gold over Marley Down. The greens and purples were brilliant beyond belief; a blue haze covered the distant hills; woodland and pasture glimmered in the valleys. The faint chiming of the bells of Roxton stirred the air as Kate Murchison walked the garden before the cottage, looking like one who had been awake all night beside a sick-bed. Her face betrayed lines of exhaustion, a dulling of the natural freshness, streaks of shadow under the eyes. She had that half-blind expression, the expression of those whose thoughts are engrossed by sorrow; the trick of seeing without comprehending the significance of the things about her.

She turned suddenly by the gate, and stood looking over the down. The very brilliancy of the summer coloring almost hurt her tired eyes. A familiar sound drowned the Roxton chiming as she listened, and brought a sharp twinge of anxiety to her face. Rounding the pine woods the rakish outline of her husband's car showed up over the banks of gorse between the cottage and the high-road. The machine came panting over the down, leaving a drifting trail of dust to sully the sunlight. Catherine caught her breath with impatient dread. This day of all days, when defeat was heavy on her husband! Could they not let him rest? If these selfish sick folk only knew!

Dr. Inglis's gold-rimmed pince-nez glittered nervously over the fence. He was a spare, boyish-looking fellow, with twine-colored hair, weak eyes, and a mouth that attempted resolute precision. Catherine hated him for the moment as he lifted his hat, and opened the gate with a deprecating

and colorless smile. Dr. Inglis had the air of a young man much worried, one whose self-esteem had been severely ruffled, and who had been forbidden sleep and a hearty breakfast.

"Good-morning. A mean thing, I'm sure, to bother Dr. Murchison, but really—"

Catherine met him, looking straight and stanch in contrast to the theorist's faded feebleness.

"What is the matter?"

"Mr. Baxter, of Boland's Farm, is seriously ill. An obscure case. His wife wishes—"

Catherine foreshadowed what was to come. The assistant appeared to have suffered at the hands of anxious and nagging relatives.

"Well?"

"A serious case, I'm afraid. I am sure Dr. Murchison would not wish me to assume all the responsibility. The wife, Mrs. Baxter, is rather an excitable woman—"

His apologetics would have been amusing at any other season. Catherine bit her lip and ignored the limp youth's deprecating and sensitive distress.

"They wish to see my husband?"

"Yes; I must suggest, Mrs. Murchison—"

"I understand the matter perfectly. Dr. Murchison cannot come."

She was bold, nay, aggressive, and the theorist looked blank behind his glasses.

"Am I to infer—?"

"Dr. Murchison is not well," and she hesitated, groping fiercely for excuses; "he has had—I think—some kind of ptomaine poisoning. Yes, he is better now, and asleep. I cannot have him disturbed."

"Indeed! I am excessively sorry. May I—?"

She saw the proposal quivering on his lips, and beat it back ere it was uttered.

"Thank you, no; you had better call in Dr. Hicks; he will advise you temporarily. Dr. Murchison will be able to resume work, I hope, to-morrow. If the case is very urgent—"

Dr. Inglis tugged at his gloves.

"I will send over word," he said, dejectedly.

"Thank you; you sympathize, I am sure."

"Of course." And being a nice youth he showed his consideration by retreating and buttoning his coat up over his burden of incompetence.

The physical prostration of a strong man who has sinned against his body is as nothing to the bitter humiliation of his soul. Ethical defeat is the most poignant of all disasters. Like an athlete who has strained heart and lungs only to be beaten, he feels that anguish of exhaustion, that miserable sense of impotence, the conviction that his strength has been of no avail. Spiritual defeat has its more subtle agonies. In some such overwhelming of the soul the man may turn his face like Hezekiah to the wall, and refuse to be comforted because of his own shame.

To Catherine her husband's awakening anguish had been pitiable in the extreme. He had lain like one wounded to the death, refusing to be comforted or to be assured of hope. Slowly, as she had sat by him and held his hand, he had told her everything, blurting out the confession with a sullen yet desperate self-hate. The very pathos of her trust in him, the divine quickness in her to forgive, had been as girdles of thorn about his body. What had he done to justify her love? Disgraced and humiliated her in this haven of rest her hands had made for him!

To appreciate to the full the irony of life, a man has but to be unfortunate for—perhaps—three days. It was about four in the afternoon when Catherine, sitting beside her husband's bed, heard the unwelcome panting of the car. The man Gage had driven fast from Boland's Farm. He had a letter from Dr. Inglis, an urgent message, so he had been told.

Catherine met him at the gate, and took the letter to her husband.

"A message, dear, from Dr. Inglis."

He reached for it with a hand that trembled, his eyes faltering from her face. She sat down by the bed, watching him silently as he tore open the envelope and read the letter.

> "Dear Murchison,—Please come over at once, if possible. Hicks has diagnosed acute internal strangulated hernia. He has been called off to a midwifery case. The relatives are getting out of hand. I think an immediate operation will be necessary. I have been to Lombard Street, and got the instruments together.
>
> "Inglis."

The jerky, straggling sentences betrayed the theorist's loss of nerve and self-control. It was evident that the gentleman with the gilded degrees was in no enviable panic.

"Well, dear?"

She bent over him, and touched his forehead.

"I shall have to go," he said, sombrely.

"Go, but you are not fit!"

He sat up in bed, looked at her, and gave a wry and miserable smile.

"If I had not been such an infernal fool! The last time, Kate, I swear!"

She caught the letter and read it through.

"Inglis is a miserable thing to lean on."

"Don't blame the youngster. At least he is sober."

She winced, as though his self-condemnation hurt her, and surrendering her fortitude of a sudden, broke out into tears. Murchison looked at her helplessly, feeling like a man bound and chained by the shame of his own manhood. He felt himself unworthy to touch her, too much humiliated even to offer comfort. The very sincerity of his self-disgust drove him to action. He sprang out of bed and began to dress.

Catherine, still sobbing, went to the window and strove to overcome the shuddering weakness that had seized her. Her husband's determination appeared to increase at the expense of her

surrender. It was as though they had exchanged moods in a moment, and that the wife's tears had given the man courage.

"Kate."

She leaned against the window, and brushed her tears aside with her hand.

"Forgive me, dear. I was a fool, an accursed fool. Never again. Trust me."

He touched her arm appealingly, like an awed lover who fears to offend. Catherine turned her head and looked at him, her courage shining through her tears.

"Your words hurt me. You called yourself a drunkard. No, no, you are not that. Oh, my beloved, I need you now—and you must go."

His arms were round her in an instant.

"Wife, look up. God help me, I will conquer the curse! How can I fail, with you?"

"Never again?—swear it."

"Never. It was a trick of the brain, a damned piece of moral vanity. And I am a man who advises others!"

She turned, and, standing before the glass, pinned on her hat and threw her dust cloak round her.

"I will come with you."

"Where?"

"Home, to the children," and she gave a great sob. "Mrs. Graham can look after the cottage. You will want me at home."

"Wife, I want you always."

CHAPTER XIII

It is the privilege of short-tempered women to wax testy under the touch of trouble, and Mrs. Baxter, her hard face querulous and unlovely, stood in the doorway of Boland's Farm, watching the road for the flash of the doctor's lamps. A couple of cypress-trees, dead and brown towards the house, built a deep porch above the door. Beyond the white palings of the garden the broad roof of a barn swept up against the sombre azure of the summer night; and the blackness of the byres and outhouses contrasted with the lawn that was lit by the lighted windows. To the west stood four great Lombardy poplars whose leaves made the night breeze seem restless about the house.

The austere figure of her sister joined itself to Mrs. Baxter's under the cypresses. They talked together in undertones as they watched the road, their voices harsh and unmusical even in an attempted whisper. Mrs. Baxter and Miss Harriet Season were tall and sinewy women, narrow of face and mind, hard in eye and body, their sense of sex reduced to insignificance. The unfortunate Inglis, who sat pulling at his watch-chain beside Mr. Thomas Baxter's bed, had found their hawk faces too keen and uncompromising for his self-esteem. They had scented out his incompetence as two old crows will scent out carrion.

"Drat the man, is he never coming!"

Mrs. Baxter smoothed her dress, and stood listening irritably, an angular and inelegant silhouette against the lamp-light.

"Just hear Tom groaning."

"And that poor ninny sitting by the bed and trying to look wise. Ain't that a light over the willows? I shall lose my temper if it ain't Murchison."

Miss Harriet tilted her head like an attentive parrot.

"I can hear the thing puffing."

"Just keep quiet—can't you?"

"Lor, Mary, you are peevish!"

"How can I listen with all your chattering?"

Murchison, depressed and out of heart, met these two ladies at the farm-house door. They greeted him with no relieved and hysterical profuseness. Mrs. Baxter extended a red-knuckled hand, looking like a woman ready to express a grievance.

"Glad you've come at last, doctor; we've been waiting long enough."

They ushered Murchison into the parlor, a room that cultivated ugliness from the wool-work mantel-cover to the red and yellow rug before the door. Murchison, like most professional men, had become accustomed to the impertinent petulance of sundry middle-class patients. Unstrung and inwardly humiliated as he was that night, the austere woman's tartness roused his impatience.

"My car broke down on the way. How is Mr. Baxter?" and he pulled off his gloves.

"Bad, sir, sorry to say. I can't think, doctor, how you could send that young chap over here."

"Dr. Inglis?"

"He don't know his business; we hadn't any faith in him from the minute he entered the door."

"Dr. Inglis is perfectly competent to represent me when I am away from Roxton."

"Indeed, doctor, I beg to differ."

Mrs. Baxter's grieved contempt suggested that Murchison had no Christian right to rest or eat when duty called him. Had the lady been less selfish and aggressive she might have been struck by the man's tired eyes and nervous, irritable manner. But Mrs. Baxter was one of those crude and complacent people who never consider the sensitive complexities of others.

"I will see your husband at once."

"I hope you're not going to operate, doctor."

Murchison's face betrayed his irritation as he moved towards the door.

"My dear madam, do you wish me to attend your husband, or do you not?"

The bony woman tilted her chin.

"I don't hold with people being cut about with knives."

Ignorance when insolent is doubly exasperating, and Murchison was in no mood for an argument.

"Mrs. Baxter, from what Dr. Hicks has said, your husband will die unless operated on immediately."

The farmer's wife shrugged, and pressed her lips together.

"Very well, doctor, have your own way."

"If I am to attend your husband you must trust in my opinion."

"Oh—of course. Do what you think proper, sir. I know we don't signify."

Murchison abandoned Mrs. Baxter to her prejudices, and climbed the stairs to the bedroom, where Dr. Inglis dabbled scalpels and artery forceps in surgical trays. The assistant's thin face welcomed his superior with a worried yet grateful smile. No heroine of romance had listened more eagerly for the sound of her lover's gallop than had Dr. Inglis for the panting of Murchison's car.

On the bed with its white chintz valance and side curtains lay the farmer, skin ashy, eyes sunken, the typical facies of acute abdominal obstruction. A sickly stench rose from a basin full of brown vomit beside the bed. The man hiccoughed and groaned as he breathed, each spasm of the diaphragm drawing a quivering gulp of pain.

Murchison, his eyes noting each significant detail, seated himself on the edge of the bed. He had hoped that Inglis might have been mistaken, and that he should find the case less grave than Dr. Hicks had suggested. Murchison dreaded the thought of an operation, even as a tired man dreads the duty he cannot justify. He felt unequal to the nerve strain that the ordeal demanded, for his hand was not the steady hand of the master for the night. Slowly and with the uttermost care he examined the man, realizing with each sign and symptom that Hicks's diagnosis appeared too true. There was no escaping from the gravity of the crisis. Unless relieved, Thomas Baxter would surely die.

Murchison rose with a tired sigh, and pressing his eyes for a moment with the fingers of his right hand, went to the table where Inglis had been arranging the instruments and dressings.

"You have anæsthetics?"

"Yes. Are you going to operate?"

"Yes, I must. It is our only chance."

"And the bed, it is a regular feather pit."

"We have to put up with these things in the country. I have performed tracheotomy with a pair of scissors and a hair-pin."

Inglis had faith enough in his chief's resources. True, Murchison looked fagged and out of fettle, yet the theorist little suspected how greatly the elder man dreaded what was before him. Poor Porteus Carmagee's port had worked havoc with that delicate marvel, the brain of the scientific age. Murchison had sustained a moral shock, and he was still tremulous with humiliation and remorse. One of the most trying ordeals of surgery lay before him, with every disadvantage to test his skill. A weaker man might have temporized, or played the traitor by surrendering to nature. Murchison's conscience was too strong to suffer him to shirk his duty.

He crossed the room to the bed, and bent over the farmer.

"Mr. Baxter, you are very ill; we must give you chloroform."

The man's sunken eyes looked up pathetically into Murchison's face.

"Oh, dear Lord, doctor, anything; I can't stand the gripe of it much longer."

"You understand that I am going to operate on you?"

"All right, sir, do just what you think proper."

In a few minutes the instrument table, with a powerful electric surgical-lamp, had been brought near the bed. Murchison had taken off his coat, tied on an apron, and was soaking his hands in perchloride of mercury. Inglis had the chloroform mask over the farmer's face. The man was weak with the anguish he had suffered, and took the anæsthetic without a struggle. Soon came the twitching of the limbs and the incoherent babbling as the vapor took effect. Murchison gave a rapid glance at the instrument table to see that everything he needed was to hand. Then he bared the farmer's body, packed it round with towels, and began to scrub and cleanse the skin.

"He's nearly under, sir."

"Good."

Murchison felt Baxter's pulse, and frowned.

"We must waste no time," he remarked, setting back his shoulders.

"The pupil reflex has gone."

"Keep him as lightly under as you can."

There was the glimmer of a knife, and a long streaking of the skin with red. Murchison worked rapidly, spreading the lips of the wound with the fingers of his left hand while he plied the knife. The patient's stertorous breathing seemed to fill the room. Murchison swabbed the wound briskly, and worked on with grim and quiet patience.

Soon half a dozen artery forceps were dangling about the wound. Murchison was bending over the farmer, insinuating his hand into the abdominal cavity. Inglis glanced at him with a worried air.

"Can you feel anything, sir?"

"Not yet."

"I don't like the pulse."

"We must risk it; watch the breathing."

Murchison's forehead had become full of lines. His face was the face of a man whose intelligence is strained to the utmost pitch of sensitiveness. The ordeal of touch, the education of four finger-tips, stood between failure and success.

Inglis shot a questioning glance at his chief's face.

"Found anything?"

"No. I must enlarge the wound."

The knife went to work again, with swabs and artery forceps to choke the blood flow. Murchison

was sweating as though he had run half a mile under a July sun. There was an impatient twitching of the muscles of his face. He breathed fast and deeply, like a man whose staying power is being taxed.

"Confound the man's fat!"

Inglis smiled feebly but sympathetically.

"Not an easy case."

"Wait. No, I thought I had something. Look after the pulse."

The strain was beginning to tell on Murchison after the overthrow of the previous night. He looked jaded, pale, and impatient. The reek of the anæsthetic made the blood buzz in his temples. At such a time a surgeon needs superhuman nerve, that iron patience that is never flustered.

Minutes passed, and the skilled fingers were still baffled. Murchison straightened his back with a kind of groan.

"Wipe my forehead," he said, curtly.

Inglis leaned forward, and wiped the sweat away with a napkin.

"Thanks," and he went to work again, yet with a hand that trembled. That supreme self-control had deserted him for the moment. He seemed feverish and spasmodic, out of temper with the difficulties of the case.

"The devil take it! Ah—at last."

He drew a relieved breath, his eyes brightening, his face clearing a little. The deft fingers had succeeded, and swabs and sponges were soon at work. Sweat dropped from his forehead into the wound, but Murchison did not heed it in his strained intentness.

"Pass me some sponges. Thanks. Count for me."

More minutes passed before Murchison lifted his head with a great sigh of relief.

"Thank God, that's over."

"Shall I stop the chloroform?"

"No, keep it on a little longer. How many sponges were there? Six? One, two, three, four, five, and the last. Now for the ligatures," and he handled the threads with quivering fingers.

Inglis was feeling the man's pulse.

"He won't stand much more, Murchison."

"All right, you can stop."

Scarcely had the concentration of his mind force relaxed for him than Murchison felt dizzy in the head, and saw a luminous fog before his eyes. Sweat ran from him; the room seemed saturated with the reek of chloroform. The reaction rushed on him with a feeling of nausea and a great sense of faintness at the heart. Bandage in hand, he swayed back, collapsed into a chair, and bent his head down between his knees.

A decanter of brandy stood on the dressing-table. Inglis, not a little scared, darted for it, and poured out a heavy dose into a tumbler.

"What's up, Murchison? Here, drink this down. Baxter's all right for the moment."

Murchison lifted a gray face from between his hands to the light.

"Thanks, Inglis, I feel done up. Don't bother about me. I shall be right again in a moment."

He put the brandy aside, and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. Inglis was completing the bandaging of the wound that Murchison had left unfinished. The farmer was breathing heavily, a streak of foam blubbering at his blue and swollen lips.

"You had better turn home, sir, I can manage now."

Murchison rose wearily and went to wash his hands.

"You must be fagged, Inglis," he retorted.

"Not a bit of it," and the theorist displayed more courage now that the responsibility was on other shoulders.

"You might stay for an hour or two. I left word in Roxton for Nurse Sprange to come out. You must put up with the old ladies' tongues."

The assistant frowned slightly as he recollected Mrs. Baxter and her sister.

"You will see them, Murchison, before you go?"

"Yes, of course."

The two shallow-chested women were waiting for news in the hideous parlor. Even Mrs. Baxter's stupidity could not ignore the look of distress on Murchison's face. By the time the doctors had taken, she guessed that an operation had been performed, and by Murchison's manner that it had not proved successful.

"Well, doctor, bad news, I suppose?"

Mrs. Baxter was more ready to quarrel than to weep.

"The operation has been perfectly satisfactory."

"Indeed!"

"Your husband is still in very grave danger, but I see no reason why he should not recover."

Murchison picked his gloves out of his hat. An expressive glance passed between Mrs. Baxter and her sister.

"You're not going, doctor?"

"Yes, Dr. Inglis remains in charge. One of the Roxton nurses will be here any moment."

The farmer's wife betrayed her indignation.

"What, that ninny! He ain't fit to doctor a cat. I tell you, Dr. Murchison, I don't want him in my house." The man's eyes flashed in his tired face. The woman's impertinence was insufferable.

"Really, madam, Dr. Inglis is perfectly competent to be left in charge. I shall see your husband early to-morrow."

Mrs. Baxter sniffed.

"Well, I call it an insult!"

"Call it what you will, my dear woman, but I need rest—like other people, and I must go."

And go he did, leaving two sour and quarrelsome faces at the farm-house door.

At Lombard Street, Catherine was waiting for her husband after putting Gwen and Jack to bed. She rose anxiously at the sound of the car, and met Murchison in the hall. His face shocked her even in the shaded lamplight. He looked like a man who had come through some great travail.

"James, dear—how—"

"I'm through with it, thank God!"

"Safely?"

"Yes."

"Well done—well done. I know how you have suffered."

CHAPTER XIV

Murchison slept the sleep of the just that night, to wake to the golden stillness of a July day. With the return of consciousness came a feeling of profound relief as he remembered the ordeal of the preceding evening. Catherine had risen while he was yet asleep, and was standing before the pier-glass combing her lambent hair. Murchison's eyes had opened to all the familiar beauty of the room, the delicate touches of color, the books and pictures, the sunlight shining upon the curtains with their simple stencilling of scarlet tulips. He lay still awhile, watching his wife, and the tremulous glimmer of the golden threads tossed from the sweeping comb. Catherine had been spared the lot of many of the married, that casual kindness, that familiar monotony that smothers all romance. Love is often blessed when gleaning the fields of sorrow, and the pathos of life is an inspiration towards poetry. Those who suffer most are the children of the spirit. Life never loses its mystery for the idealist, while your *épicier* has no stronger joy than the purchasing of a red-wheeled gig or the building of some abominable and inflamed-face villa.

Murchison rose, kissed his wife, and dressed to the sound of his children laughing and romping in the nursery. There was something invigorating to him in their noisy prattle, a breath of the east wind, a glimpse of the sea. On the landing he met Miss Gwen running to him with open arms. Murchison seized on the child, and kissed her, as though God had given him a pledge of honor. The clean home-life seemed very sweet to him that morning. He felt strong and sure again, ready to retrieve the unhappiness of yesterday.

The day's first rebuff met him at the breakfast-table when a rough cart stopped outside the house, and the maid brought him a dirty note from Boland's Farm, with "Immediate" scrawled across the corner of the envelope. Instinct warned Murchison that it contained bad news, and Catherine saw the clouding of her husband's face as he read the letter.

"Mr. Baxter is worse, dear?"

"Yes," and he passed her the note; "it is the species of case that breeds bad feeling."

Catherine flushed angrily as she read the letter. It came from Mrs. Baxter, and was the impertinent production of a vulgar and half-educated mind.

"What an insufferable person. And this is gratitude! Shall you go, dear?"

"I must. They refuse to see Inglis."

Catherine's eyes glistened as she returned the letter.

"Professional men have much to bear," she said.

"Chiefly the criticism of ignorant people."

"And the ingratitude!"

Murchison smiled.

"I have found the good to outweigh the bad," he said; "but these cases sadden one."

The hours had passed stormily at Boland's Farm. There had been a brisk battle between Mrs. Baxter and the nurse, before the latter lady had spent sixty minutes under the farm-house roof, a battle that had originated in the simple brewing of a basin of beef-tea. The nurse and the housewife advocated different methods, and the trivial variation had been sufficient to set the women quarrelling. Dr. Inglis had intervened in the middle of the discussion, only to divert Mrs. Baxter's anger to himself. She had assured the theorist bluntly that they needed him no further, and had requested him to inform Dr. Murchison that the Baxters, of Boland's Farm, were not to be insulted by being served by an assistant. Despite the energy of his wife's tongue, Thomas Baxter's condition had grown markedly worse. The nurse and the two shrews had watched by him through the night, their pitiable peevishness unmoved by the sick man's peril.

At seven o'clock Nurse Sprange had favored Mrs. Baxter with her opinion.

"Worse, of course!" the housewife had exclaimed; "what can any Christian creature expect after the way they hacked the poor soul about?"

The nurse had ruffled up in defence of the profession.

"You had better send at once for Dr. Murchison."

"I should think we had. The lad can drive over in the milk-cart. Murchison did the thing; he'd better mend it, if he can."

Murchison drove through the July fields where the corn was rustling for the harvest. The cottage gardens were full of flowers, sweet-pease a-flutter in the sun, the borders packed with scent and color. On the river's bank the willows drooped lazily, and the meadows had been shorn of their fragrant hay. To the south the pine woods of Marley Down touched the azure of the sky.

His welcome at Boland's Farm was neither cordial nor inspiring. Murchison had expected sour faces, and sour and sinister they were. Mrs. Baxter was a cynic by choice, one of those women who count their change carefully to the last farthing as though forever expecting to be cheated. Her manner towards Murchison was abrupt and aggressive. She bore herself towards him with a threatening dourness, as though she held him responsible for her husband's critical condition.

"I am sorry to hear Mr. Baxter is no better."

The lady looked supremely sapient, as though the brilliance of her genius had foreshadowed the

event.

"I think I told you, doctor, that I don't hold with all this operating."

"I am sorry that we disagree."

"Perhaps you will step up-stairs, doctor, and just see Mr. Baxter for yourself."

Madam's presence was not enthralling, and Murchison escaped from her with relief. The ugly parlor, with its texts and its piety, seemed part and parcel of the world to which farmer Baxter's wife belonged. But sick men cannot be responsible for their wives, and Murchison knew that Tom Baxter was more sinned against than sinning.

Nurse Sprange was sitting by the patient's bed, looking limp and tired, as though her patience had been torn to tatters by Mrs. Baxter's restless temper. She rose as Murchison entered, and drew back the curtains to let more light into the room. Murchison nodded to her, and took the chair that she had left. The farmer was lying very still and straight, his eyes half closed, his breathing shallow, as though any expansion of the chest gave him acute pain.

"Well, Baxter, how do you feel?"

The man turned his head feebly.

"Ay, doctor, not mighty grand."

"Any pain now?"

"Pain, sir, plenty; not like the gripe, but just as if I had a lot of weed-killer sluicing about inside of me."

"Ah! Any tenderness?"

The farmer winced under Murchison's hand.

"Bless you, doctor, it be damned sore!"

"Where?"

"All over. What d'you think of me, sir? I guess I'm pretty bad."

The man's eyes were searching Murchison's face. He had been a fat and hearty liver, a full-blooded man who had loved life, where his wife was not, and was loath to leave it. There was something pathetic in his almost bovine dread, as though like one of his own oxen he had an instinct of the end. Murchison pitied him. He had seen many such men die, some like frightened animals, others sullen and sturdy against their doom.

"You must keep up your pluck, Baxter," he said.

"I know, sir, but—"

"My dear fellow, you are very bad, it is no use shirking it. I hope yet to see you recover."

"All right, doctor, you've done your best," and he turned his face away with a groan of despair.

Murchison took the nurse out with him to the head of the stairs, and questioned her as to any symptoms she had observed during the night. Her evidence only tended to strengthen the gloomy prognosis he had already made. Nothing remained for him but to consider Mrs. Baxter's unsensitive soul.

The lady did not weep. On the contrary, she displayed gathering resentment, the prejudice of an inferior nature, and gave Murchison the benefit of her free opinion.

"I may as well tell you, doctor, that I'm not satisfied. If my Tom had had proper attention from the first—"

"Well?"

"You wouldn't have had to use that there knife. And it's my opinion, sir, that you've done more harm than good."

Murchison's patience was being severely tested.

"I don't think you are quite yourself, Mrs. Baxter," he remarked.

"Not myself, indeed!"

"I cannot hold you responsible for what you are saying."

The suggestion of any hysterical weakness on her part offended the lady more than her husband's probable decease.

"Look here, doctor, I'm no fool, and I tell you you've done your business badly."

"My dear woman, this is absolutely unwarranted."

"I beg to differ, sir, and—"

Murchison prevented the imminent insult.

"If you care to place the case in other hands, by all means do so."

"I shall send for Dr. Steel."

"As you please."

"And don't you be afraid of getting your money."

"That is a secondary consideration."

"Oh, I guess not, operations don't cost twopence-halfpenny. I'll send for Steel at once."

Murchison took his hat and gloves.

"Then, Mrs. Baxter, I had better wish you good-morning?"

And being too much of a philosopher to accuse the lady of ingratitude, he left her in possession of her prejudices.

It had been the season of garden-fêtes at Roxton, when the gracious gowns of the mesdames and demoiselles glorified the sleek lawns and herb-scented gardens of the old town. Gay colors and piquant hats were in July flower, save for the few sober weeds who put forth no gaudy corolla to attract the winged messengers of love. Mrs. Betty had paraded the terraces and yew walks in dove-colored silk, in crimson, and in lilac. Her successive sunshades were as so many royal flowers that came as by magic from the house of glass. She was an æsthetic spirit, and loved beauty, particularly when the picture was painted upon the surface of her own pier-glass.

Yet, delectable as she was with her pale and sinuous glamour, Mrs. Betty had many rebuffs to remember within the sound of St. Antonia's bells. Dull, domesticated ladies in a country town do not embrace with enthusiasm a young and fascinating woman who has a habit of drawing the men about her. Mrs. Betty was regarded as a dangerous person, a species of Circe who looked sidelong

into the faces of respectable married men, and possessed a mother-wit and a vivacity that made her seem like sparkling wine beside the “domestic ditch-water” she abhorred.

Catherine Murchison succeeded with her sister-women where Betty Steel failed utterly. There was a frankness, an absolute lack of the guile of the Cleopatra, about her that set jealous matrons at their ease. She was so notoriously devoted to her own husband and her home that the respectable flock welcomed her with pleasant bleatings. It was this very popularity of hers that impressed itself on the social pageantries of Roxton. The quick-eyed Betty saw her rival receive the smiles of the feminine community, while she herself was favored with polite distrust. Catherine Murchison was considered orthodox, and to be orthodox is the first proof of gentility among genteel people. Mrs. Steel might be stigmatized as something of a social heretic. And women, being the most outrageous Tories in their heart of hearts, dreaded the fascinating and glib-tongued Socialist who would perhaps reform the marriage laws into free love.

Hence, through all the galaxy of the Roxton garden-parties, Parker Steel’s wife had accumulated many incidental grievances against her rival. Women are sensitive beings, so sensitive that their feelings may be diffused into a smart gown or a Paris hat. The old battle-fire burned in Mrs. Betty’s Circassian eyes. She was amassing her grievances, slowly, surely, and with that curious secretiveness that has often characterized the feminine heart.

“Thomas Baxter, of Boland’s Farm, is dead.”

Parker Steel whisked his serviette over his knees, and looked with a peculiar glint of the eye at his wife in her orange-silk tea-gown.

“Dead, no!”

“Dead as Marley.”

“But they only turned Murchison out yesterday.”

“Exactly. And the dear wife is in the most militant of tempers, the Puritanical old fraud.”

Betty Steel’s olive skin had flushed. She was breathing deeply, and her glance had a significant and inspired glitter.

“Parker.”

“Well?”

“What else?”

The spruce physician showed his teeth.

“You expect more?”

“Yes, you are teasing me, keeping back some delicate morsel. Has Murchison blundered?”

“The wish seems mother to the thought.”

“Perhaps.”

“Mrs. Baxter has demanded a post-mortem examination. I am to perform it.”

His wife’s lips parted, and closed again into a hard line. She looked wickedly handsome in her yellow gown.

“I shall take Brimley, of Cossington, with me.”

“Good. You must have a second opinion, and Brimley does not love the six-footer. What do you think, Parker?—tell me frankly.”

The doctor wiped his mustache, took up his sherry glass and sipped the wine.

“Can’t say—yet,” he answered.

“But supposing—”

“Well, what am I to suppose?”

“That Murchison blundered badly.”

Dr. Steel meditated an instant.

“Professional etiquette”—he began.

Mrs. Betty’s eyes flashed.

“Professional nonsense! If—Parker, you must not lose a possible chance.”

Her husband regarded her with amused interest.

“You would strike your little Italian stiletto into Murchison’s reputation,” he said.

CHAPTER XV

There is little that is beautiful in death, save, perhaps, in the faces of children, and those taken in the heyday of their youth. As in life the majority of mortals are ugly and grotesque, so in death the body grows in repulsiveness as it nears the grave. The lily corpse with the angelic smile is rarely seen, save perhaps by irresponsible poets. Blotched and stiff, shrunken or inflated, the nameless thing welcomes putrefaction and decay. Beauty of outline is lost to the limbs, the bones show at the joints, the muscles stand out in stiff and unnatural relief. Nothing but the glamour of sentiment preserves this ruined tabernacle of the flesh from being designated as a “carcass.”

At Boland’s Farm the house had that sickly and indescribable smell of death. Farmer Baxter’s bullocks grazed peacefully in the great fourteen-acre lot to the east of the garden; the hens clucked and scratched in the rickyard; the pigs sucked and paddled in the swill. The laborers were at work as though their master was still alive to curse them across fields and hedgerows. The soil pays no heed to death; it is a natural occurrence; only we human beings elevate it into an incident of singularity and note. The farm-hands who passed through the yard cast curious and awed looks at the darkened windows of the house. Mrs. Baxter had given them their orders, and they knew there would be no shirking where that lady was concerned.

A couple of traps were standing before the garden gate, and in the death-chamber two intent figures bent over the bed that had been drawn close to the open window. The sun shone upon the body, a mere mountain of flesh, loathsome, gaping, flatulent, lying naked from loins to chin. In death this carcass seemed to dishonor all the higher aspirations of the race. A myriad organisms

were usurping the tissues that had worked the will of what men call “the soul.”

Dr. Brimley, of Cossington, a little, spectacled cherub of a man, held back the yellow flaps of fat-laden skin while his confrère groped and delved within the cavity. There was a wrinkle of disgust about Parker Steel’s sharp mouth. He had never vanquished that loathing of contact with the nauseous slime of death. The cold and succulent smoothness of the inert tissues repelled his cultured instincts. Yet even the superfine sneer vanished from about his nostrils as he drew out a black and oozing object from the dead man’s body.

“Good God, Brimley, look at this!”

The spectacled cherub peered at it, puckered up his lips and gave a whistle.

“A sponge!”

“Nice mess, eh?”

“Relieved that I haven’t the responsibility.”

Steel’s delicate hands were at work again. A sharp exclamation of surprise escaped him as he drew out a pair of artery forceps, and held them up to Brimley’s gaze.

“This is a pretty business!”

Dr. Brimley’s eyes seemed to enlarge behind his spectacles.

“Confoundedly unpleasant for the operator. The man must have lost his head.”

“Put your hand in here,” and Parker Steel guided his confrère’s fingers into the cavity, “tell me what you feel.”

Brimley groped a moment, and then elevated his eyebrows.

“Good Lord!—what was Murchison at? A rent in the bowel three inches long!”

“We had better have a look at it.”

And the evidence of the sense of vision confirmed the evidence of the sense of touch.

Both men perched themselves on the bed, and looked questioningly into each other’s eyes. Success demands the survival of the fittest, and in the scramble for gold and reputation men may ignore generosity for egotistical and self-serving cant. Parker Steel did not determine to act against his rival, without a struggle. He remembered his wife’s words, and they decided him.

“What are you going to do?”

Parker Steel looked Dr. Brimley straight in the face.

“There is only one thing to be done,” he retorted.

“Well, sir, well?”

“I have no personal grudge against Murchison, but before God, Brimley, I can’t forgive him this abominable bungling. Professional feeling or no, I can’t stretch my conscience to such a lie.”

Dr. Brimley stared and nodded. He was somewhat impressed by Steel’s cultured indignation, a professional Brutus waxing public-spirited over Cæsar’s body. Moreover, he was no friend of Murchison’s, and was secretly pleased to hear another man assume the moral responsibility of injuring his reputation.

“So you will tell the old lady?”

“I take it to be a matter of duty.”

“Quite so; I agree with you, Steel. But it will about smash Murchison.”

Parker Steel moved to the wash-stand and began to rinse his hands.

“I cannot see how I can give a death certificate,” he said; “the man must have been drunk. It is a case for the coroner.”

Dr. Brimley puckered his chubby mouth and whistled.

“There is no other conclusion to accept,” he answered.

Mrs. Baxter was awaiting the two gentlemen in the darkened parlor, dressed in her black silk Sabbath gown. She had a photograph-album on her knee, and was chastening her grief by referring to the faded pictures of the past. Each photograph stood for a season in the late farmer’s life. Tom Baxter as a fat and plethoric-looking youth of twenty, in a braided coat and baggy trousers, one hand on a card-board sundial, the other stuffed into a side-pocket. Tom Baxter, ten years later, in his Yeomanry uniform, mustachioed, tight-thighed, nursing a carbine, with an air of assertive self-satisfaction. Tom Baxter and his bride awkwardly linked together arm in arm, toes out, top hat and bridal bouquet much in evidence. Tom Baxter, fat, prosperous, and middle-aged, smoking his pipe in a corner of the orchard, his Irish terrier at his feet; a snapshot by a friend. The widow studied them all with solemn deliberation, glancing a little scornfully at her sister Harriet, who was snivelling over a copy of Eliza Cook’s poems.

They heard the voices of the two doctors above, the sound of a door opening, and footsteps descending the stairs. Parker Steel, suave, quiet, and serious as a black cat, appeared at the parlor door. Mrs. Baxter rose from her chair, and signalled to her sister to leave her with Parker Steel.

“Harriet, go out. Sit down, doctor,” and she replaced the album on its pink wool mat in the middle of the circular table.

Harriet absented herself without a murmur, Miss Cook’s volume still clasped in her bony fingers. From the direction of the stables came the plaintive howling of a dog, Tom Baxter’s Irish terrier, Peter, who had been chained up because he would haunt the landing outside his dead master’s room. Mrs. Baxter had fallen over the poor beast as he crouched at the top of the stairs, and poor Peter’s loyalty had not saved him from chastisement with the lady’s slipper.

Parker Steel seated himself on the extreme edge of an arm-chair, a great yellow sunflower in a Turkish-red antimacassar haloing him like a saint. He had assumed an air of studied yet anxious reserve, as though the matter in hand required delicate handling.

“Well, doctor, it’s all over, I suppose.”

Steel nodded, hearing Miss Harriet’s voice in the distance rasping out endearments to the dead man’s dog.

“Dr. Brimley and I have completed the examination.”

“Poor Tom! poor Tom!”

“I can sympathize with you, Mrs. Baxter.”

“Thank you, doctor. How that dog do howl, to be sure! And now, sir, let’s come to business.”

The widow sat erect and rigid in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap, an expression of determined alertness on her face. Steel, student of human nature that he was, felt relieved that it was Murchison and not he who had incurred the resentment of this hard-fibred woman.

“Will you be so good as to tell me, doctor, just what my husband died of?”

Parker Steel fidgeted, and studied his finger-nails.

“It is rather painful to me,” he began.

“Painful, sir!”

“To have to confess to a brother-doctor’s misman—misdirection of the case.”

His tactful disinclination reacted electrically upon Mrs. Baxter. She leaned forward in her chair, and brandished a long forefinger with exultant solemnity.

“Just what I thought, doctor.”

Parker Steel cleared his throat and proceeded.

“You understand my professional predicament, Mrs. Baxter. At the same time, I feel it to be my duty—”

“Just you tell me the plain facts, doctor; what did my husband die of?”

Steel rose from his chair, walked to the window, and stood there a moment looking out into the garden, as though struggling with the ethics and the etiquette of the case.

“Frankly, Mrs. Baxter,” and he turned to her with a grieved air, “I am compelled to admit that this operation hastened your husband’s death.”

Mrs. Baxter bumped in her chair.

“Doctor, I could have sworn it. Go on, I can bear the scandal.”

“Dr. Murchison made a very grave mistake.”

“He did!”

“A sponge and a pair of artery forceps were left in your husband’s body. As for the operation, well, the less said of it the better.”

Mrs. Baxter rose and went to the mantel-shelf, and taking down a bottle of smelling-salts, applied them deliberately to either nostril.

“Then this man Murchison killed my husband!”

Parker Steel gave an apologetic shrug.

“I have to state facts,” he explained. “I cannot swear to what might have happened.”

“Let the ‘might have’ alone, doctor. I’ve pulled the pease out of the pod, and by the Holy Spirit I’ll boil my water in Murchison’s pot!”

Parker Steel attempted to pacify her, confident in his heart that any such effort would be useless.

“My dear Mrs. Baxter, let me explain to you—”

“Explain! What is there to explain? This man’s killed my husband. I’ll sue him, I’ll make him pay for it.”

“Pardon me, one word—”

The widow raised her hands and patted Steel solemnly on the shoulders.

“You’ve done your duty by me, doctor, for I reckon it isn’t proper to tell tales of the profession. Now, listen, I’ll relate what Jane Baxter’s going to do.”

Steel’s silence welcomed the confession.

“Well, I’m going to order the market-trap out, the trap my poor Tom used to drive in to Roxton every Monday, the Lord have pity on him!—”

“Yes.”

“I’m going straight to call at Lawyer Cranston’s.”

“Indeed!”

“And just set him to pull Dr. Murchison’s coat from off his back.”

CHAPTER XVI

There was a dance that night at one of the Roxton houses, and Mrs. Betty, brilliant in cream and carnation, swept through the room with all the verve of a girl of twenty. Her partners discovered her in wondrous fettle—swift, splendid, and audacious, color in her cheeks, a sparkle of conscious triumph in her eyes. Her tongue was in sympathy with the quickness of her feet. She prattled, laughed, and was as deliciously impertinent as any minx who has a theory of fascination.

Mrs. Hamilton-Hamilton, the hostess of the night, was a patient of James Murchison’s, and Catherine’s more gracious comeliness came as a contrast to Mrs. Betty’s faylike glamour. The Hamiltons were brewers, wealthy plebeians who had assimilated that lowest of all arts, the art of making money, without absorbing a culture that was of the same temper as their gold. Catherine had left her husband to his pipe and his books at Lombard Street. She had come to serve him, because as a doctor’s wife she knew the value of smart publicity. In small towns trifles are of serious moment. Orthodoxy is in the ascendant, and individual singularity of opinion is considered to be “peculiar.” A professional gentleman suspected of free thought may discover his social standing being damaged by the vicaress behind his back. Bigotry dies hard despite the broadening of our culture, and “eccentric” individuals may be ostracized by the sectarians of a town. Forms and formularies produce hypocrites. It is perilous for professional gentlemen to appear eccentric. Even if they abstain from lip service in person, their wives must be regular in helping to populate the parish pews.

Kate Murchison and Mrs. Betty passed and repassed each other in the vortex of many a waltz. To Parker Steel’s wife there was a prophetic triumph on the wind. She found herself calculating, as she chatted to her partners, how long these people would remain loyal to the surgeon of Lombard

Street when his repute was damaged by the scandal at Boland's Farm. Catherine had a peculiar interest for her that night, for Mrs. Betty's hate was tempered by exultation. She watched for the passing and repassing of Catherine's aureole of shimmering hair, smiling to herself at the woman's happy ignorance of the notoriety that threatened her husband's name.

To Catherine also, with each sweep of the dance, came that olive-skinned and complacent face, whose eyes seemed ever on the watch for her. She caught the rattle of the dark woman's persiflage as she drifted past to the moan of the violins. She remarked an exaggerated vivacity in Mrs. Betty's manner, a something that suggested triumph with each nearness of their faces. Always the slightly cynical smile, the teeth glimmering between the lips; always that curious flash of the eyes, sudden and momentary, like the flash of a light over the night sea. With women the vaguest of emotions lead to intuitive gleams of thought, and Mrs. Betty's exultation inspired Catherine with reasonless unrest.

The two women met in the doorway of the supper-room, Parker Steel's wife on Mr. Cranston's arm, Catherine escorted by Captain Hensley, of the Buffs. Their eyes met with a glitter of defiance and distrust. Catherine would have drawn aside, but Betty, with a laugh, gave her a pretty sweep of the hand.

"Seniores priores, dear. How is your husband? What a delicious evening!"

The presentiment of treachery asserted itself with superstitious strangeness. Catherine colored, stung, despite herself, by Parker Steel's wife's patronizing drawl.

"Thanks. My husband is very well. Has he been ill?" and the ironical question conveyed a challenge.

Mrs. Betty's lips parted over their perfect teeth.

"Mr. Cranston is such an enthusiast that I must not lose him the next waltz. Try the pâté de foie gras, it is excellent," and she swept out, with a glitter of amusement, on the lawyer's arm.

They were soon moving in the midst of the music, a score of rustling dresses swinging their colors over the polished floor.

"Poor Mrs. Murchison," and the lawyer looked curiously into his partner's face.

"Strange that we should have met her, just then!"

"After our discussion at supper!"

"Yes; she knows nothing."

"My dear Mrs. Steel, the penny-post carries more poison than the rings of the old Italians."

"But then we are more civilized in our methods."

"Possibly. The cruelties of civilization are more refined, of the soul rather than of the body. Shall we reverse?"

"Yes. There are some fatalities that cannot be reversed, Mr. Cranston, eh?"

Catherine returned to the great house in Lombard Street that night with a vague feeling of melancholy and unrest. She was beginning to know the terror of a secret in a house, a hidden shame to be held sacred from the eyes of the world. Nor was it that she did not trust her husband, nor respect his strength, for few men would have fought as he had fought, and even in defeat she beheld a pathos that was wholly tragic, never sordid.

She was haunted by the thought that night that Betty Steel had guessed her secret, and only women know the feline cruelty of their sex. The greater part of the social snobberies and tyrannies of life are inspired by the spiteful egotism of women. Catherine knew enough of Betty's nature to forecast the mercy she might expect from her rival's tongue. Moreover, the very home-coming from the dance recalled to her that March night when she had first uncovered her husband's shame. There are some memories that are like aggressive weeds, no tearing up by the roots can banish them from the human heart. Their tendrils creep and thrust into every crevice of the mind. Their fruit is full of a poisoned juice, their flowers red as hyssop—for all the world to see.

As for the sake of irony, the letters that Betty Steel and Mr. Cranston had discussed, were opened by Murchison at the breakfast-table before the faces of his children and his wife. Master Jack had been clamoring to be taken to the cottage on Marley Down, and Gwen had crept round to her father's elbow to overpersuade him with the winsomeness of childhood. The first letter that Murchison opened was from Cranston; the second from Parker Steel. Miss Gwen, doll in hand, stood unheeded at her father's elbow. It was Catherine who rose, called the two children, and took them out into the garden to play.

They clung, one to either hand, the boy prancing and chattering, the girl solemn-eyed because of her father's silence.

"Mother, when may we go to Marley?"

"Soon, dear, soon."

"Oh, I say, do they keep rabbits there?"

"And will daddy come too?"

Catherine disentangled herself, and left them on the lawn under the great plane-tree, her heart heavy with some half-expected dread.

"Daddy will come too, dear. I will call you when you are to come in."

Murchison was still sitting at the breakfast-table when she returned, looking like a man who had lost his all at cards. His figure appeared shrunken, and hollow at the shoulders, his face expressionless as though from some sudden palsy of the brain.

"James!"

He started as though he had not heard her enter.

"The children, where—?"

"In the garden. Tell me, what has happened?"

"Happened? My God, Kate, see, read!—what have I done?"

She stretched out her hand, her face piteously brave.

"This letter?"

He nodded.

“From whom?”

“Steel. There is to be an inquest at Boland’s Farm.”

Catherine read it, and the lawyer’s also, an angry glow welling up into her eyes. She crumpled the letters in her hand, and stood silent a moment, with quivering lips.

“Now, now—I know—”

Murchison stared at her like one half-dazed.

“You have read it?”

“Yes. A blunder! No, I’ll not believe it, James; there is malice here. I read it in Betty Steel’s eyes last night.”

“But the facts,” and he groaned.

“Facts! Are they facts? Is Parker Steel infallible? Wait, I know what I will do.”

Murchison’s eyes watched her like the eyes of a dog.

“I will see Dr. Parker Steel. I will ask him by what right he has dared to act as he has acted.”

Her words seemed to shake her husband from his stupor.

“Kate, you cannot do it.”

“Why not?”

“Beg a favor of that fop! Besides, the case has gone too far. The facts are there. I blundered. I knew that I had lost my nerve.”

She looked at him with a woman’s pity, her pride and her love still strong and heroic in their trust.

“It was not you, dear—not you.”

“Not I, Kate, but my baser self. Fate takes us when we are in the toils.”

They heard the children in the garden, their laughter close beneath the window. Murchison’s hands caught the arms of his chair. His children’s happiness seemed part of the mockery of fate.

“Don’t let them come in. I can’t bear it. I—” and he broke down suddenly into that most pitiful and tragic pass when a strong man’s anguish brings him even to tears.

Catherine, her face transfigured, bent over him, and seized his hands.

“Oh, not that! Why, we are here together, and you look on the darker side—”

His tears were on her hands; he was ashamed, and hung his head.

“Kate, it is true, I feel it. Steel—”

“Steel?”

“Is too cold a man to risk what he cannot prove.”

She drew her breath, and kissed him, the kiss of a mother and a wife.

“I will go to him,” she said.

“Kate!”

“No, not to plead. I could not plead with such a man as Steel.”

CHAPTER XVII

Parker Steel was compiling his list of visits for the day, when, following the sharp “burr” of the electric bell, came the announcement that Mrs. Murchison, of Lombard Street, waited to see him in the drawing-room. A momentary cloud of annoyance passed over the physician’s sleek and shallow face. Few men care to appear ungenerous in the eyes of a woman, and Parker Steel was not devoid of the passion for indiscriminate popularity. The craving to appear excellent in the eyes of others is a more potent power for the polishing of man’s character than the dogmatics of a state religion, and Mrs. Betty’s husband purred like a cat about the silk skirts of society. Man for man, he could have dealt with Murchison on hard and scientific lines, but with a woman the logic of unsympathetic facts could be consumed by the lava flow of the more passionate privileges of the heart.

He continued scribbling at his desk, mentally considering the attitude he should assume, and hesitating between an air of infinite regret and a calm assumption of stoical responsibility. The door opened on him as he still studied his part. Mrs. Betty stood on the threshold, eyes a-glitter, an eager frown on her pale face.

She closed the door and approached her husband, leaning the palms of her hands on the edge of the table.

“Well, Parker, are you prepared with sal-volatile and a dozen handkerchiefs?”

Steel looked uneasy, a betrayal of weakness that his wife’s sharp eyes did not disregard.

“I suppose I must see the woman,” and he fastened the elastic band about his visiting-book with an irritable snap.

“See her? By all means, unless you are afraid of needing a tear bottle.”

“Perhaps you would prefer to interview—”

A flash of malicious amusement beaconed out from his wife’s eyes.

“No, no, sir, you must assume the responsibility. I shall enjoy myself by listening to your diplomatic irrelevances.”

Parker Steel pushed back his chair.

“Betty, you are a woman, what do you advise?”

“Advise!” and she laughed with delicious satisfaction. “Am I to advise infallible man?”

“Well, you know the tricks of the sex.”

“Do I, indeed! Firstly, then, my dear Parker, beware of tears.”

The physician gave an impatient twist to his mustache.

“Kate Murchison is not that sort of creature,” he retorted.

“No, perhaps not. But you may find her dangerous if she makes use of her emotions.”

“Hang it, Betty, I hate scenes!”

“Scenes are easily avoided.”

“How?”

“By a process of refrigeration. Be as ice. Do not give the lady an opportunity to melt. Compel her to restrain herself for the sake of her self-respect.”

Steel smiled ironically at his wife’s earnestness.

“An antagonistic attitude—”

“Exactly. Polite north-windedness. Be an iceberg of professional propriety. Kate Murchison has pride; she will not catch you by the knees. Heavens, Parker”—and she brimmed with mischief—“I should like to see you trying to disentangle your legs from some hysterical lady’s embraces!”

Her husband glanced at himself in the glass, and adjusted his tie as a protest against his wife’s raillery.

“The sooner the interview is ended—the better,” he remarked.

“Wait, let me see you attempt the necessary stony stare!”

And she glided up and kissed him, much to the spruce physician’s sincere surprise.

Catherine had been moving restlessly to and fro in the drawing-room, glancing at the photographs and pictures, and listening to the murmur of voices that reached her from Parker Steel’s consulting-room. The air of the house seemed oppressive to her, and there was even an unwelcome strangeness about the furniture, as though the inanimate things could conspire against her and repel her sympathies. The environment was the environment of an unfamiliar spirit. The personality of the possessor impresses itself upon the home, and to Catherine there seemed superciliousness and a sense of antagonism in every corner. Her woman’s pride put on the armor of a warlike tenderness. She thought of her children, and was caught thinking of them by Parker Steel.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Murchison.”

“Good-morning.”

“Won’t you sit down?”

There was a questioning pause. Catherine remained standing, her eyes studying the man’s smooth, clever, but soulless face.

“I have come, Dr. Steel, half as a friend—”

The physician’s smile completed the inimical portion of the sentence.

“I cannot but regret,” and he rested his white and manicured hands on the back of a Chippendale chair, “that you have thought fit to interview me, Mrs. Murchison, on such a matter.”

Catherine watched his face as he spoke.

“Of course you realize—”

“The nature of the case? I realize it, Mrs. Murchison, too gravely to admit this meeting to be a pleasure.”

His chilly suavity reacted on Catherine as Betty Steel had promised. Individual antipathy comes quickly to the surface. Any display of feeling before Parker Steel would have been like throwing a burning torch down into the snow.

“I presume you realize the nature of the responsibility you are assuming?”

Her tone had nothing of pacification or appeal. The curve of her neck became the more haughty as she realized the purpose of the man to whom she spoke.

“It is my responsibility, Mrs. Murchison,” and he bent his slim and black-sheathed figure slightly over the rail of the chair, “that makes this interview the more painful to me.”

“You have accused my husband of gross incompetence and carelessness.”

“I have stated facts.”

“Dr. Murchison’s surgical experience is not that of a mere theorist. It has an established reputation. You understand me?”

Parker Steel understood her perfectly, his nostrils lifting at the rebuff.

“My duty, Mrs. Murchison, is towards my own conscience.”

“I do not deny your sense of duty.”

“And the facts of the case—”

“Say—rather—your interpretation of those facts.”

“Madam!”

“For in the interpretation lies the meaning of your action. I can only warn you, for your own sake, to be careful.”

Parker Steel’s mask of unsympathetic suavity lost its unflurried coldness for the moment.

“My dear Mrs. Murchison, I have my day’s work before me, and I am a busy man. It is my misfortune to have earned your resentment by the discovery of a blunder. Please consider the question to be beyond our individual interests.”

“Then I am to understand—?”

“That I have already adopted the only course that seemed honest to me. I have declined to give a death certificate and I have communicated with the coroner.”

Catherine took the blow without flinching, though a deep resentment stirred in her as she remembered how her husband had bulwarked Parker Steel.

“Then I think there is nothing more to be said between us.”

The physician made a step towards the door.

“Accept my regrets”—the vanity of the man, the desire to stand well in the eyes of a handsome woman, was not wholly to be suppressed.

“I accept no regrets, Dr. Steel—”

“Indeed.”

“For no regrets are given. My eyes are open to the truth.”

Steel turned the handle of the door.

“A sense of duty makes us enemies, Mrs. Murchison.”

“Perhaps, sir, your very lively sense of duty may lead you some day into a lane that has no turning.”

Whether by chance, or by premeditated malice, Mrs. Betty crossed the hall as Catherine left the

drawing-room. She halted, smiled, and extended a languid hand. Her eyes recalled to Catherine the eyes of the previous night.

"Ah, good-morning, Kate."

There was not a quiver of emotion on Catherine Murchison's face. She looked at Mrs. Betty as she would have looked at some pert shop-girl who assured her that some warranted material had been ruined by chemicals in the wash. Parker Steel's wife was deprived of any suggestion of a triumph.

"I hope you are not tired after Mr. Cranston's enthusiasm."

"Intelligent partners never tire me. May I echo the inquiry?"

Her feline spite marred the perfection of Mrs. Betty's patronizing pity.

"Many thanks. You will excuse me, since I am a woman with responsibilities. You have no children to act as mother to, Betty."

The barren woman's lips tightened. The words, with all their innocent irony, went home.

"Oh, I detest children. All the philosophers will tell you that they are a doubtful blessing."

"A matter of temperament, perhaps."

"Some of us resemble rabbits, I suppose."

Their mutual courtesy had reached the limit of extreme tension. Parker Steel, who had been watching the lightning flashes, the play between positive clouds and negative earth, opened the door to let the imminent storm disperse.

Catherine passed out with a slight bending of the head.

"How beautiful these July days are!" she remarked.

"Superb," and Steel took leave of her with a cynical smile.

CHAPTER XVIII

Catherine's lips were tightly set as she turned from the shadows of St. Antonia's elms, where the sunlight made a moving fret of gold upon the grass. The sky was a broad canopy of blue above the town, the wooded hills about it far and faint with haze. To Catherine the summer stillness of the place, the dim blazoned windows of the church, the wreathing smoke, the circling pigeons, were parts of a quaint and homely tenderness that made her realize the more the repellent coldness of the house she had just left.

She had come by one conviction through her visit, the conviction that those two intellectualists hungered to humiliate her and her husband. Mrs. Betty's eyes had betrayed too much. She would be content with nothing but sensational head-lines, and the discussion of "the scandal" in every Roxton home. The brain behind that ethereal yet supercilious face knew no flush of feeling for a rival in distress. The pair were exulting over the chance James Murchison had given them, and the wife had realized it with a bitter flooding up of loyalty and love.

Catherine had made her plans before she reached the glare of Lombard Street. She had left her husband sitting in the darkened room, the blinds drawn down over his humiliation and self-shame. Her heart grieved in her for the strong man whose sensitive consciousness had been paralyzed by the realization of his own irrevocable blunder. Her pity left him undisturbed, like a sick man needing rest. Inglis had taken the work for the whole day, for Catherine had interviewed him in the surgery, and shocked the theorist by imparting a portion of the truth to him.

"Incredible!" had been Mr. Inglis's solitary remark, and Catherine's heart had blessed him for that single adjective.

As she passed the house in Lombard Street, her face seemed overshadowed for the moment by the unpropitious heaviness of her thoughts. The vision of her husband's pale and troubled face saddened her more utterly than any regretfulness her pride might feel. Nor did she pass her home unchallenged, for at the barred but open window of the nursery, a ripple of gold in the sunlight bathed her daughter Gwen's round face,

"Muvver, muvver!" and a doll's red pelisse was waved over the window-sill. Catherine felt all her womanhood yearn longingly towards the child.

"Muvver. I've spelled a whole page. Daddy's gone out. May I come wid you?"

Catherine shook her head, her eyes very bright with tenderness under her blue sunshade. How little the child realized the grim beneathness of life!

"No, dear, no. I shall be back soon. Ask Mary to take you for a walk in the meadows," and she passed on with a lingering look at the red pelisse and the golden curls.

Porteus Carmagee, white as to waistcoat, brown as to face, jumped up briskly from his well-worn leather chair when his head clerk announced Mrs. Catherine Murchison. The lawyer, despite his eccentricities, was a keen and tenacious man of business, the emphasis of whose advice might have impressed an audience more cynical than the English House of Commons. He had a habit of snapping at his syllables with a vindictive sincerity that stimulated nervous clients suffering from the neurasthenia of indecision.

"What!—a professional visit? My dear Kate, this is a most portentous event; all my musty deeds must blush into new pink tape. Sit down. Do you want damages against your washerwoman for spoiling the underlinen? Believe me—I have been asked to advise on such questions. Ah, and how did your husband like my port?"

An inward shudder swept through Catherine. The memories of that night at Marley Down were brutally vivid to her, like the bizarre dreams of a feverish sleep remembered in the morning. Porteus had been the innocent cause of all this misery. Tell him she could not, that his very kindness had brought her husband to the brink of ruin.

"We ought to have thanked you"—and the words clung to her throat. "James has had one of his attacks of nervous depression and an endless amount of worry."

Porteus Carmagee's keen brown eyes sparkled with intentness as he watched her face. She looked white, uneasy, haggard about the mouth, like one who has suffered from the strain of perpetual self-repression. Catherine had always moved before him as a serene being, a woman whose face had symbolized the quiet splendor of an evening sky. He had often quoted her as one of the few people in the world whose happiness displayed itself in the beauty of radiant repose. The stain of suffering on her face was new to him, and the more remarkable for that same reason.

"You speak of worries, Kate. Am I to be concerned in them as a fatherly friend?"

She tried to give him one of her happy smiles.

"You see—I have to run to you—because I am in trouble."

The pathetic simplicity of her manner touched him.

"My dear Kate," and his voice lost its usual snappishness, "how can I serve you—as a friend? It is not usual to see you worried."

"You know James has been overworked."

"Have I not lectured the rogue on a dozen different occasions?"

"Yes, yes, I know; and he was ill at Marley Down on Sunday, in the little place where I had hoped to give him rest. Oh, Porteus, how brutal the responsibilities of life can be at times! Inglis, our assistant, sent for him to attend a serious case. James's sense of duty dragged him away from Marley. He went, braved a critical operation, and—"

She faltered, her face aglow, as though the very loyalty of her love made the confession partake of treachery. The wrinkles about Porteus Carmagee's eyes seemed to grow more marked.

"And made a mess of it, Kate, eh?"

His brusquerie passed with her as a characteristic method of concealing emotion.

"Yes."

"Ugh!" and he jerked one leg over the chair; "confound his sense of duty, risking his reputation to ease some old woman's temper."

Catherine looked at him with a quivering of the lips.

"Porteus, you can't blame him. It seems hard that one slip may undermine so much."

"Why 'undermine'?—why 'undermine'? The law does not expect infallibility."

"I know—but then—the man died."

"Who? What man?"

"Farmer Baxter, of Boland's Farm."

"A fool who has been eating himself to death for years."

Catherine spread her open hands with the look of a pathetic partisan.

"James was not in a fit state to meet the strain. The wife quarrelled with him after the operation, and refused to let him continue the case."

"My dear, inferior females always quarrel!"

"And we have enemies."

"So had the saints, and plenty."

"It was Parker Steel—"

Porteus Carmagee sat up briskly in his chair, his wrinkled face twitching with intelligence.

"Now we are growing vital. Well, I can forecast that gentleman's procedure."

"Steel was called in, and the man died."

"Most natural of mortals!"

"He performed a post-mortem with Dr. Brimley, of Cossington, at the widow's request. As a result he has refused to give a death certificate and has written to the coroner. And Mrs. Baxter has instructed Cranston to institute an action against us for malpraxis and incompetence."

Porteus Carmagee sat motionless for a moment, his legs tucked under his chair, his brown face suggestive of the ugliness of some carved mediæval corbel.

"I flatter myself that I recognize the inspiring spirit, Kate," he said, at last.

"Betty Steel."

"That's the lady; we have learned to respect our capabilities, Mrs. Betty—and I."

He pushed his chair back, established himself on the hearth-rug, and began the habitual rattling of his bunch of keys.

"Well, Kate, you want me to act for you."

"If you will."

"If I will? My dear girl, don't insult my affection for you all. I must confess that I like to feel vindictive when I undertake a case. No city dinner could have made me more irritable, vulpine, and liverish in your service."

Catherine's eyes thanked him sufficiently, but they were still brimming with questioning unrest.

"Porteus, tell me what you think."

"My dear Kate, don't worry."

"How can I help worrying?"

The brown and intelligent face, like the face of a sharp and keen-eyed dog, lit up with a peculiar flash of tenderness for her.

"Come, Kate, I am not a full-blooded optimist, as you know, but your woman's nature makes the affair seem more serious than it is. Your husband was overworked, and ill at the time, yet these people insisted—I take it—on his assuming the full responsibility of the case. Steel is notoriously an unprincipled rival; as for Brimley, of Cossington, the fellow is known as the most saintly humbug as ever made ginger and water appear as potent as the elixir vitæ. My dear Kate, I know more of the secret squabbles of this town than you do. People have threatened to sue Parker Steel before now—yes, in this very room. If spite and spleen are dragged into the case, I think I can promise our opponents a somewhat stormy season."

A look of relief melted into Catherine's eyes. Porteus Carmagee was emphatic, and women look for emphasis in the advice of a man.

"You are doing me good, Porteus."

“That’s right. The law is a crabbed old spinster, but she can be exhilarating on occasions. Tell me, when did you receive the challenge?”

“This morning, by letter.”

“From whom?”

“Parker Steel and Mr. Cranston.”

“Exactly. And your husband?”

She faltered, and looked aside.

“James was deeply shocked by the thought.”

“Of course—of course. He is a man with a conscience. What is he doing?”

“I left him at home—to rest. I ought to tell you, Porteus, that I have seen Parker Steel.”

The lawyer frowned.

“Unwise, Kate, unwise. I hope—”

“No,” and she flushed, hotly; “I made no pretence of weakness. They had defiance from me.”

“Good girl—good girl.”

“They are bitter against us. It was easy to discover that.”

Porteus Carmagee drew out his watch.

“In an hour, Kate, I will run over and see your husband. Oblige me by telling him not to look worried. Now, my dear girl, nonsense, you needn’t.”

Catherine had risen, and had put her hands upon his shoulders. And on that single and momentous occasion, Porteus Carmagee blushed as his bachelor face was touched by the lips of June.

The words of a friend in the dry season of trouble are like dew to the parched grass. Catherine left Porteus Carmagee’s office with a feeling of gratitude and relief, as though the sharing of her burden with him had eased her heart. From a feeling of forlorn impatience she sprang to a more sanguine and happy temper, with her gloomier forebodings left among the deeds and documents of the dusty office. She thought of her husband and her children without that wistful stirring of regret, that fear lest some store of evil were being laid up for them in the home she loved. Her reprieve was but momentary, had she but known it, for the cup of her humiliation was not full to the brim.

As she turned into Lombard Street, she came upon her two children returning with Mary from a ramble in the meadows. The youngsters raced for her, eyes aglow, health and the beauty thereof in every limb. The omen seemed propitious, the incident as sacred as Catherine could have wished. Perhaps to the two children her kisses seemed no less warm and heart-given than of yore, but to the mother the moment had a meaning that no earthly poetry could portray.

“Ah—my darlings—”

“Where have you been, muvver—where?”

“At Uncle Porteus’s. Mary, run around to Arnsbury’s and ask him to send me in some fruit. I will take the children home.”

Mary departed, leaving youth clinging to the maternal hands. Master Jack Murchison pranced like a war-horse, his curiosity still cantering towards Marley Down.

“Oh, I say, mother, when are we going to the cottage?”

“Saturday, dear, perhaps.”

“Daddy said we might have tea in the woods.”

“Boys who put pepper on the cat’s nose don’t deserve picnics.”

Master Jack giggled over the originality of the crime. “Old Tom did sneeze!”

“You was velly cruel, Jack,” and Gwen’s face reproved him round her mother’s skirts.

“Little girls don’t know nuffin.”

“I can spell ‘fuchsia,’ I can.”

“What’s the use of spelling! Any one can spell—can’t they, mother?”

“No, dear,” and the mother laughed; “many people are not as far advanced as Gwen.”

They were within twenty yards of the great house in Lombard Street, with its warm red walls and its white window frames, when a crowd of small boys came scattering round the northeast corner of St. Antonia’s Square. In the middle of the road a butcher had stopped his cart, and several people were loitering by the railings under the elms, watching something that was as yet invisible to Catherine and the children.

“I specs it’s Punch and Judy,” and Master Jack tugged at his mother’s hand.

“Wait, dear, wait.”

“Muvver, may I give the Toby dog a biscuit?”

“Two, Gwen, if you like.”

“I just love to see old Punch smack silly old Judy with a stick!”

“Jack, you are velly cruel,” and the little lady disassociated herself once more from all sympathy with her brother’s barbaric inclinations.

A man turned the corner of the street suddenly, cannoned two small boys aside, and hurried on with the half-scared look of one who has seen a child crushed to death under a cart. He stopped abruptly when he saw Catherine and the children, his white and resolute face glistening with sweat.

“Mrs. Murchison, take the children in—”

Catherine stared at him; it was John Reynolds, her husband’s dispenser.

“What is it—what has happened?”

The man glanced backward over his right shoulder as though he had been followed by a ghost.

“Dr. Murchison was taken ill at the County Club. They sent round for me. Good God, ma’am, get the children out of the way!”

For a moment Catherine stood motionless with the sun blazing upon her face, her eyes fixed upon a knot of figures dimly seen under the shadows of the mighty elms. A great shudder passed through her body. She stooped, caught up Gwen, and carried the wondering child into the house. Reynolds, the dispenser, followed with the boy, who rebelled strenuously, his querulous innocence making the tragedy more poignant and pathetic.

“Shut up, silly old Reynolds—”

“There, there, Master Jack,” and the man panted; “be quiet, sir. Mrs. Murchison, I must—you understand.”

Catherine, her face wonderful in its white restraint, her eyes full of the horror of keen consciousness, hurried the two children up the stairs. Outside in the sunlit street the club porter and a laboring man were swaying along with an unsteady figure grappled by either arm. The troop of small boys sneaked along the sidewalk, and on the opposite pavement some dozen spectators watched the affair incredulously across the road.

“Dang me if it ain’t the doctor.”

“What, Jim Murchison?”

“Drunk as blazes.”

A little widow woman in black slipped away with a shudder from the coarse voices of the men. “How horrible!” And she looked ready to weep, for she was one of Murchison’s patients and had known much kindness at his hands.

John Reynolds had gone to help the two men get Murchison up the steps into the house.

“Good God, sir,” he said, “pull yourself together!”

“Lemme go, R’nolds, I can walk.”

“Steady, sir, steady! For the love of your good lady, get inside.”

And between them they half carried him into the house, three men awed by a strong man’s shame.

Catherine had locked the two children into the nursery. She stood on the stairs, and saw the limp figure of her husband lifted across the hall into his consulting-room. It was as though fate had given her the last most bitter draught to drink. Their cause was lost. She felt it to be the end.

Reynolds, the dispenser, came to her across the hall. The man was almost weeping, so bitterly did he feel the misery of it all.

“I—I have sent for Dr. Inglis.”

“Thank you, Reynolds.”

“Shall I stay?”

“Yes, for God’s sake, do!”

The other two men came out from the consulting-room, and crossed the hall sheepishly, without looking at Catherine. She turned, and reascended the stairs, leaving to Reynolds the task of watching by her husband. The sound of a small fist beating on the nursery door seemed to echo the loud throbbing of her heart. She steadied herself, choked back her anguish, unlocked the door, and went in to her children.

“Muvver, muvver!” Gwen’s eyes were full of tears.

“Yes, darling, yes.”

“Is daddy ill?”

“Daddy—daddy is ill,” and she took the two frightened children in her arms, and wept.

CHAPTER XIX

By certain scientific thinkers life is held to be but a relative term, and the “definitions” of the ancients have been cast aside into the very dust that they despised as gross and utterly inanimate. Whether radium be “alive” or no, the thing we ordinary mortals know as “life” shows even in its social aspects a significant sympathy with the Spencerian definition. The successful men are those who react and respond most readily, and most selfishly to the externals of existence. Vulgarly, we call it the seizing of opportunities, though the clever merchant may react almost unconsciously and yet instinctively to the market of the public mind. All life is an adjustment of relationships, of husband to wife, of mother to child, of cheat to dupe, of capital to labor.

Thus, in social death, so to speak, a man may be so placed that he is unable to adapt himself to his surroundings. His reputation dies and disintegrates like a body that is incapable of adjusting itself to some blighting change of climate. Or, in the terminology of physics, responsible repute may be likened to an obelisk whose instability increases with its height. A flat stone may remain in respectable and undisturbed equilibrium for centuries. The poised pinnacle is pressed upon by every wind that blows.

The fall of some such pinnacle is a dramatic incident in the experience of the community. The noise thereof is in a hundred ears, and the splintered fragments may be gaped at by the crowd. Thus it had been with James Murchison in Roxton town. Neither doctors nor engine-drivers are permitted to indulge in drink, and in Murchison’s case the downfall had been the more dramatic by his absolute refusal to qualify the disgrace. An inquest, an unflattering finding by the coroner’s jury, a case for damages threatening to be successfully instituted by an outraged widow. Amid such social humiliations the brass plate had disappeared abruptly from the door of the house in Lombard Street. It was as though Murchison’s pride had accepted the tragic climax with all the finality of grim despair. He had even made no attempt to sell the practice, but, like Cain, he had gone forth with his wife and with his children, too sensitive in his humiliation to brave the ordeal of reconquering a lost respect.

Many months had passed since the furniture dealers’ vans had stood in the roadway outside the house in Lombard Street, with bass and straw littering the pavement, and men in green baize aprons going up and down the dirty steps. Frost was in the air, and the winter sun burned vividly upon the western hills. A fog of smoke hung over the straggling town, lying a dark blurr amid the white-misted meadows. Lights were beginning to wink out like sparks on tinder. The dull roar of a

passing train came with hoarse strangeness out of the vague windings of the valley.

As the dusk fell, a smart pair of “bays” switched round the northwest corner of St. Antonia’s Square and clattered over the cobbles under the spectral hands of the towering elms. The church clock chimed for the hour as Parker Steel, furred like any Russian, stepped out of the brougham, and, slamming the door sharply after him, ordered the coachman to keep the horses on the move. Dr. Steel’s brougham was not the only carriage under St. Antonia’s sleeping elms. A steady beat of hoofs and a jingling of harness gave a ring of distinction to the quiet square.

Parker Steel glanced at the warm windows of his house as he crossed the pavement, and fumbled for his latch-key in his waistcoat pocket. The sound of music came from within, ceasing as the physician entered the hall, and giving place to the brisk murmur of many voices. A smart parlor-maid emerged from the drawing-room, carrying a number of teacups, blue and gold, on a silver tray. The babble of small talk unmuffled by the open door suggested that Mrs. Betty excelled as a hostess.

Ten minutes elapsed before Parker Steel, spruce and complacent, was bowing himself into his own drawing-room with the easy unction of a man sure of the distinction of his own manners. Quite twenty ladies were ready to receive the physician’s effeminate white fingers. Mrs. Betty had gathered the carriage folk of Roxton round her. The heat of the room seemed to have stimulated the scent of the exotic flowers. The shaded standard lamp, burning in the bay-window beside the piano, shed a brilliant light upon a pink mass of azaleas in bloom. Mrs. Betty herself was still seated upon the music-stool, one hand resting on the key-board as she chatted to Lady Sophia Gillingham, sunk deep in the luxurious cushions of a lounge-chair.

Mrs. Betty, a study in saffron, her pale face warmed by the light of the lamp, caught her husband’s eye as he moved through the crowded room. Sleek, brilliant, pleased as a cat that has been lapping cream, she made a slight gesture that he understood, a gesture that brought him before Lady Gillingham’s chair.

“Parker.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Will you touch the bell for me?—I want to show Mignon to Lady Sophia.”

Parker Steel’s smile congratulated his wife on her deft handling of the weapons of social diplomacy. He rang the bell, and meeting the servant at the door, desired her to bring Mrs. Betty’s blue Persian and the basket of kittens from before the library fire.

The physician took personal charge of Mignon and her children, and returning between the chairs and skirts, presented the family to Lady Sophia.

Parker Steel had an ecstatic lady at either elbow as he held the basket lined with red silk, the three mouse-colored kittens crawling about within. Mignon, the amber-eyed, had made a leap for Mrs. Betty’s lap.

“The dears!”

“How absolutely sweet!”

“Such tweety pets.”

The two elderly canaries cheeped in chorus while Lady Sophia’s fat and pudgy hand fondled the three kittens. Her red and apathetic face became more human and expressive for the moment, though there was a suggestion of cupidity in her dull blue eyes.

“The dear things!” and she lifted one from the basket into her lap, where it mewed rather peevishly, and caught its claws in Lady Sophia’s lace.

“Mignon is a prize beauty,” and Mrs. Betty caressed the cat, and looked up significantly into her husband’s face.

“Perfectly lovely. There, there, pet, what a fuss to make!” and the dowager’s red-knuckled hand contrasted with the kitten’s slate-gray coat. “I suppose they are all promised, Mrs. Steel?”

“Well, to tell the truth, they have created quite a rage among my friends.”

“No doubt, the dears. You could ask quite a fancy price for such prize kittens.”

Parker Steel had been prompted by an instant flash of his wife’s eyes.

“I am sure if Lady Gillingham would like one of the kittens—”

He appeared to glance questioningly, and for approval, at Mrs. Betty.

“Of course—I shall be delighted.”

“Really?”

“Why, yes.”

“Then—may I buy one?”

Parker Steel elevated his eyebrows, and, with the air of a Leicester, refused to listen to any such proposal.

“Do not mention such a matter. We shall only be too glad.”

“But, my dear Mrs. Steel—”

“I agree wholly with my husband.” And Mrs. Betty stretched out a white hand, and stroked the ball of fluff in Lady Sophia’s lap. “Choose which you like. They can leave the mother in a week or two.”

Lady Gillingham’s plebeian face beamed upon Mrs. Betty.

“This is really too generous.”

“Why, not at all,” and her vivacity was compelling.

“Then I may choose this one?”

“With pleasure.”

“Isn’t it a pet?”

Mignon, purring on Mrs. Betty’s lap, failed to realize in the least how valuable a social asset she had proved. There was a rustling of skirts, a shaking of hands, as the room began to empty of its silks and laces. Lady Sophia struggled up with a fat sigh from the depths of her chair, stroked Mignon’s ears, and held out a very gracious hand to Mrs. Steel.

“Can you dine with us on Monday?”

“Delighted.”

“Sir Gerald Gerson and the Italian ambassador will be with us. I want to show you some choice Dresden that my husband has just bought at Christie’s.”

Mrs. Betty received the favor with the smiling and enthusiastic simplicity of an ingenuous girl.

“How kind of you! I am so fond of china.”

Parker Steel gave his arm to the great lady, and escorted her to her carriage, his deportment a professional triumph in the consummation of such a courtesy.

He found Mrs. Betty alone in the drawing-room when he returned. She was lying back in the chair that Lady Gillingham’s stout majesty had impressed, and had Mignon and a kitten on her lap.

Parker Steel, standing on the hearth-rug, looked round him with the air of a man to whom the flowers in the vases, the lilies and azaleas in bloom, seemed to exhale an incense of success. Social prosperity and an abundance of cash; the expensive arm-chairs appeared to assert the facts loudly.

“A satisfactory party, dear, eh?”

Mrs. Betty, fondling Mignon’s ears, looked up and smiled.

“I think we have conquered Boadicea at last,” she said.

“It appears so.”

“She should be a most excellent advertisement.”

Parker Steel fingered his chin, and looked meditatively at the carpet. A self-satisfied and half-cynical smile hovered about the angles of his clean-cut mouth.

“A year ago, Betty,” he remarked, “Lady Sophia pertained to Catherine Murchison, and showed us the cold shoulder. Well, we have changed all that.”

“We?”

“Well, say the workings of the ‘spirit,’ or the infirmities of the flesh.”

Mrs. Betty held Mignon against her cheek and laughed.

“What a dear, soft, fluffy thing it is!”

“Set a cat to catch a cat, eh? I wonder what our friend Murchison is doing?”

“Murchison! I never trouble to think.”

Parker Steel studied his boots.

“Poor devil, he made a pretty mess of a first-class practice. They were hard up, too, I imagine. Damages and costs must have cleared out most of Murchison’s investments, and their furniture sold dirt cheap. I can’t tell why the ass did not try to sell the practice.”

“Pride, I suppose.”

“It meant making me a present of most of his best patients.”

“My dear Parker, never complain.”

“Hardly, when we should be booking between two and three thousand a year—at least. Well, I must turn out again before dinner.”

The physician returned to his fur coat and his brougham, leaving Mrs. Betty fondling Mignon and her kittens.

CHAPTER XX

A hundred rows of mud-colored brick “boxes,” set face to face and back to back. Scores of cobbled streets, a gray band of stone, and two gray bands of slate. Interminable brown doors and dingy windows; interminable black and sour back yards, festoons of sodden underclothing, moping chickens caged up in corners, rubbish, broken boxes, cinder heaps, and smoke.

Hardness in every outline, in the dirty, yellow-walled houses, in the faces of the women, and in the crude straightness of every street. An atmosphere of granite, brick, cast-iron, and slate. No softness of contour, no flow of curves, no joy in the sweep of land or sky. The color scheme a smirch of gray, yellow, and dingy red. Scarcely a streak of green in the monotonous streets. The sky itself, at best a dusty blue, sliced up into lengths by slate roofs and cast-iron gutters.

To the south of this wilderness of brick and stone rose the chimneys and cage wheels of the Wilton collieries. Here the sketch had been worked in charcoal, black wharves beside a black canal, hillocks of coal, black smoke, black faces. The whirr of wheels, the grinding of shovels, the banging of trucks being shunted to and fro along the sidings. The eternal spinning of the cage wheels, the panting and screaming of engines, the toil and travail of a civilization that disembowels the very earth.

In Wilton High Street, where electric trams sounded their gongs all day, and cheap shops ogled the cheap crowd, there was a broad window that had been colored red and topped by a line of gold some eight feet above the pavement. On this sanguinary window ran an inscription in big, black letters:

DR. TUGLER, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P.

Consulting hours, 8 to 10 and 6 to 9

Consultations one shilling. Medicines included.

Those be-shawled ladies who carried their rickety infants into Dr. Tugler’s shop, might find the doctor and one of his two professional assistants seated in the two cheap, cane-bottomed arm-chairs before two baize-topped tables. There were wooden benches round the room, a glass-fronted cabinet in one corner, medical almanacs on the walls, a placard over the mantel-piece instructing patients “To bring their own bottles.” An inner door with ground glass panels led to a dingy surgery, a white sink in one corner, and a dresser littered with instrument cases, packages of lint,

reels of plaster, and boxes of bandages. A third door opened from the surgery into the dispensary, a veritable bower of bottles, lit by a skylight, a ledger desk under the gas-jet in one corner, medicine glasses standing on the sloppy drug-stained dresser, a spirituous reek filling the little room. Oil-cloth, worn patternless, covered all the floors. The gas-jet in the surgery flared perpetually through all the winter months, for the sky-light was too small and dirty to gather much light from the December skies.

It was Saturday night at Wilton, and hucksters were shouting up their wares in High Street, despite the fine and almost impalpable rain that wrapped everything in a dismal mist. The gongs of the tram-cars clanged impatiently past Dr. Tugler's surgery, where a row of stalls ranged beside the pavement gathered a crowd of marketers under their naphtha lamps. Trade had been busy behind the red window that Saturday evening. Piles of shillings and sixpences lay in the drawer of Dr. Tugler's consulting-table, small change left by anæmic, work-worn women, who needed food and rest more than Dr. Tugler's cheap and not very effectual mixtures. The room had been full of the bronchitic coughing of old men, the whining of children, the scent of wet, warm, dirty clothes.

The front room had emptied itself at last, an old woman with a cancerous lip being the last to go. Dr. Tugler was sitting at the table nearest to the red window, counting up the miscellaneous and greasy pile of small coins, and packing them pound by pound into a black hand-bag that lay across his knees. He was a vulgar little man with a cheerful, blustering manner, and a kind of plump and smiling self-assurance that was never at a loss for the most dogmatic of opinions.

Among the Wilton colliery folk he was known distinctively as "the doctor." A man of finer fibre might have been wasted amid such surroundings. Dr. Tugler, florid, bumptious, ever ready with a semi-decent joke, and boasting an aggressive yet generous aplomb, contrived to impress his uncultured clients with a sense of sufficiency and of rough-and-ready power. But for his frock-coat, and for the binoral stethoscope that dangled from the top button of his fancy waistcoat, he might have been taken for a prosperous publican, a bookmaker, or a butcher.

Dr. Tugler swept the remaining small change into his bag, locked it, and jumped up with the air of a man eminently satisfied with the day's trade. The assistant at the other table was pencilling a few notes into a pocket-book, and humming the tune of a popular, music-hall song. The surgery door opened as Dr. Tugler deposited the black bag on the mantel-shelf, and a swarthy collier, with one hand bandaged, came slouching out, swinging an old cap.

"Good-night, doctor."

Dr. Tugler faced round with his hands stuffed into his trousers pockets.

"Hallo, Smith, find the knife sharp, eh?"

The man grinned, and glanced at his bandaged hand.

"There was a tidy lot of muck in it," he said.

"Good thing we've saved the finger. Paid your bob, eh? Right. Keep off the booze, and go straight home to the missus."

Tugler turned down the gas-jets, and entered the surgery. A big man in a white cotton coat was bending over the sink and washing a porcelain tray under the hot-water tap. Blood-stained swabs of wool lay in an old paper basket under the sink. A couple of scalpels, a pair of dressing forceps and scissors, a roll of lint, dental forceps still clutching a decayed tooth, an excised cyst floating in a bowl of blood-stained water, such were the details that completed the picture of a general surgeon at work.

Dr. Tugler cast a quick and observant glance round the room, turned down the gas a little, and counted the bandages in a card-board box on the dresser.

"Feel fagged, Murchison, eh?"

The big man turned, his lined and powerful face wearing a look of patient self-restraint.

"No—thanks."

"Be easy on the bandages," and Dr. Tugler gave a frowning wink; "we can't do the beggars à la West End on a bob a time."

The big man nodded, and began to clean his knives.

"A message has just come round from Cinder Lane, No. 10. Primip. Glad if you'd see to it. I feel dead fagged myself."

An almost imperceptible sigh and a slight deepening of the lines about Murchison's mouth escaped Dr. Tugler's notice.

"I will start as soon as I have cleaned these instruments. No. 10, is it?"

"Yes. Here's the week's cash."

Dr. Tugler rapped down three sovereigns and three shillings on the dresser, and turning into the dispensary, busied himself by inspecting the contents of the bottles with the critical eye of a man who realizes that details decide the difference between profit and loss.

In ten minutes Murchison had taken off his white cotton coat, pocketed his money, put on a blue serge jacket and overcoat, and taken a rather shabby bowler from the peg on the surgery door. He picked up an obstetric bag from under the dresser, and crossing the outer room with a curt "good-night" to his fellow-assistant, plunged into the glare and drizzle of Wilton High Street.

Despite the rain, the sidewalks were crowded with Saturday-night bargainers who loitered round the stalls under the flaring naphtha lamps. The strident voices of the salesmen mingled with the clangor of the passing teams and the plaintive whining of the overhead wires. Here and there the glare from a public-house streamed across the pavement, and through the swing-doors, Murchison, as he passed, had a glimpse of the gaudy fittings, the glittering glasses, the rows of bottles set out like lures to catch the eye. The bars were crowded with men and women, the discordant hubbub of their voices striking out like the waters of a mill-race into the more even murmur of the streets.

The man with the bag shuddered as he passed these glittering dens, and felt the hot breath of the "drink beast" on his face. His eyes seemed to fling back the glare of the lights with a fierceness that was not far from fanatical disgust. Possibly there was an element of mockery for him in the coarse chattering and the braying laughter. His fingers contracted about the handle of his bag. He

seemed to hurry with the air of some grim wayfarer in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, escaping from sights and sounds poignant with the prophecies of despair.

In Cinder Lane, Murchison found the door of No. 10 half open, and a man sitting reading in his shirt-sleeves in the little front parlor. A significant whimpering came from the room above, the first faint crying of a new-born child. A flash of relief passed across Murchison's face. The sound reprieved him from a possible night-watch in the stuffy heat of a room that smelled of paraffin, stale beer, and unwashed clothes.

"All over, I think."

The man with the paper rose, removed his clay pipe, jerked back his chair, and grinned.

"Jus' so, doctor."

"So much the better for every one."

"Lord love you, doctor, I feel as though I'd bin sittin' on 'ot coals for ten mortal hours."

Murchison swung his overcoat over a chair, and climbed the stairs, a half open door showing a band of light blotted by the shadow of a woman's head. The proud father returned to his pipe and to his paper and the mug of beer on the table at his elbow. He looked a mere lad, sickly, beardless, hatchet-faced, with high shoulders and no chest. Coal-dust seemed to have been grimed into the pores of his greasy and wax-white skin.

The lad's smirk was a quaint mixture of pride and sheepishness when Murchison came down the stairs half an hour later and congratulated him on the possession of a son.

"Glad it's over, doctor. 'Ave a drop?" and he reached for a clean glass.

Murchison's face hardened.

"No, thanks very much. Your wife has come through it very well."

The man put his paper down and held Murchison's overcoat for him.

"Well, it's a mercy, doctor, that it ain't twins."

"Not a double responsibility, eh?"

The lad winked.

"Why, there's a cove bin writin' in this paper as 'ow every man ought t' have a woppin' fam'ly. I sh'ld like to ask 'im, ''ow about the bread and cheese?'"

"And the beer, perhaps?"

"Ther, doctor, only two bob a week—reg'lar. That ain't ruination. It's a bit sweaty down in the coal-'ole. I give the missus most of the money."

"So do I," and Murchison smiled at the lad with something fatherly in his eyes.

"You do that, doctor?"

"I do."

"Well, there ain't much mistake in makin' the missus yer banker when she's clean and tidy, and looks to a man's buttons."

Murchison turned out again into the drizzling rain, and swung along a dozen dreary streets that resembled each other much as one curbstone resembles another. A church clock was striking eleven as he reached a row of little, red brick villas on the outskirts of the town, with a dirty piece of waste-land in front and the black canal behind. He stopped before a gate that bore, as though in irony, the name "Clovelly." There was no blue, boundless Atlantic within glimpse of Wilton town, no flashing up of golden coast-lines in the sunlight, no towering cliffs piling green foam towards a sapphire sky.

The front door opened at the click of the garden gate, if ten square feet of garden and a gravel-path could be flattered with the name of a garden. A woman's figure stood outlined by the lamp burning in the hall. She was dressed in a cheap cotton blouse, and skirt of dark-blue serge, but the clothes looked well on her, better than silks on the body of another.

Her husband's face drew out of the darkness into the light. Catherine's eyes had rested half-questioningly on it for a moment, the eyes of a woman whose love is ever on the watch.

"I am late, dear," and he went in with a feeling of tired relief.

They kissed.

"Come, your supper is ready. Dear me, what a long day you have had!" and she glanced at the bag, understanding at once what had kept him to such an hour.

"How are the youngsters?"

"Asleep since nine."

Catherine took his coat and hat, and put her arm through his as they went into the little front room together. A coke fire glowed in the diminutive grate, a saucepan full of soup stood steaming on the trivet. Murchison sat down at the table that was half covered by a white cloth. At the other end lay his wife's work-basket, with a dozen pairs of socks and stockings. Her eyes had been tired before the opening of the garden gate. Now they were bright and vital, for love had wiped all weariness away—that heroic, quiet love that conquers a thousand sordid trifles.

"Saturday is always busy."

"I know," and she smiled as she poured him out his soup.

"I think we had nearly a hundred people to-night. Thanks, dear, thanks," and he touched her hand.

Catherine sat down on the sofa, and took up her stockings, seeing that he was tired, too tired to care to talk. Her woman's instinct was rarely at a loss, and a tired man appreciates restfulness in a wife.

When he had finished, she rose and drew the solitary arm-chair before the fire, and brought him his pipe and his tobacco. Murchison's face softened. He never lost the consciousness of all she had forgiven.

He drew out the week's money when they had talked for a while, and handed the three sovereigns to her, keeping only the three shillings for himself. Catherine wore the key of their cash-box tied to a piece of ribbon round her neck. It was Murchison who had insisted on this precaution. Every week he gave the money to her, and saw her lock it in the cash-box on her desk.

“Shall I still keep the key, dear?”

“Keep it.”

“Yes,” and she colored like a girl, “you know that I trust you.”

“I know it, but I have sworn to myself, dear, to risk nothing.”

She rose slowly and put the money away, glad in her heart of his quiet and determined strength.

“I understand—”

“That I mean to crush this curse now—once—and forever.”

Murchison finished his pipe, and Catherine put her work away. The front door was locked, the gas turned out. Husband and wife went up the stairs together, Catherine carrying the lighted candle. She opened a door leading from the narrow landing, and they went in, hand in hand, to look at their two children who were asleep.

A wistful smile hovered about Murchison’s mouth.

“Poor little beggars, they don’t see much of me!”

He was thinking of the past and of the future. Indeed, he thought the same thoughts nightly as he looked at the two heads upon the pillows.

“Gwen is looking better again.”

“Is she?” and he sighed.

“We had quite a long walk to-day before it began to rain.”

They spoke in undertones, Murchison leaning over Gwen’s little bed. He looked at her very lovingly, as though wishing to feel her small arms about his neck.

“Good-night, little one. Good-night, Mischief Jack,” and he turned to his wife with the air of a man repeating a solemn and nightly prayer.

CHAPTER XXI

Failure is bitter enough in itself to a man of energy and strength of purpose, but more bitter still are the humiliations and the sufferings that failure may impose on those he loves.

Reputation, resources, his very home, had been swallowed up, but in Murchison there was that dogged northern spirit, that stubborn uplift against odds, that is at its strongest when confronted with defeat. Like a man brought to the edge of a black cliff at night, he had looked down grimly into the depths, depths that waited not for him alone, but for the innocent children who held his hands.

As a cheap assistant in a colliery town, James Murchison had joined issue with his own unfitness for the ordeal of life. A tight-mouthed and rather silent man, he had entered upon the rebuilding of his self-respect with the dogged patience of a Titan. The little, red brick villa, with the dirty piece of waste land in front and the black canal behind, might have suggested no stage for heroic drama to the casual eyes of Murchison’s neighbors. The big, brown-faced man stalked to and fro to work, quiet and unobtrusive, a figure that was soon familiar to most of the middle-class people who lived on either side. He seemed one of those many mortals who move through life without a history, an ant in an ant world, busy, monotonously busy, earning his paltry pounds a week, without glamour, and without fame.

Man suffers most in seeing those dear to him in suffering, and the tragic tones of life are caught from the lips of those he loves. The wounds of a wife or of a child are open in the heart of the husband or father. Remorse or self-accusation, if there be cause for such a feeling, is as the vinegar on the sponge to the man crucified by his own sin. One has but to come in contact with the material side of civilization to discover how desperately sordid this twentieth-century life can be. How great the contrast was between Roxton lying amid its woods and meadows, and the dismal colliery town, Murchison, as a father, realized too soon. The one smelled of the fresh earth, primal and invigorating; the other of soap-works, soot, cabbage-water, and rancid oil. In Roxton the mortality was low; in the colliery town hundreds of infants died yearly before they were four weeks old.

Such realism, the vivid heritage of thousands, might well make a man go grimly through life, the burden of care very heavy on his shoulders.

To watch a wife’s face fade, despite her courage, poverty and sorrow bringing weariness to the serenest eyes.

To know that drudgery burdens the dear life of the home.

To watch the lapsing of a child from sheer health into sickness, the beautiful aliveness vanishing, the bloom marred like the bloom on handled fruit.

The consciousness of dependence and obligation, the receiving of brusque instructions from a man of cheap and vulgar fibre.

Sordid surroundings, sordid neighbors, an utter dearth of friends.

Work, eternal work, day in, day out; no Sabbath rest, no time for home life, no money to give joy to those most dear.

A vivid ghost past following, like a shadow.

A dim and unflattering future before the eyes, a future darkened by the prophetic dread of leaving wife and children alone in a selfish world.

Such were the realities that filled James Murchison’s sphere of consciousness, realities that were responsible for many a sleepless night.

It was the afternoon of a February day when Murchison stopped before the theatre in Wilton High Street, for the colliery town delighted in melodrama, and pulling out a pigskin purse, examined the contents with critical consideration. He had saved a few shillings by stinting himself in tobacco, and in his daily lunch at a cheap eating-house near Dr. Tugler’s surgery. The pantomime “Puss in Boots” was still running at the theatre, and at the box-office Murchison bought four tickets

for the upper circle.

In the old days the children had gone up yearly to Drury Lane, and Master Jack had been making many allusions to the gaudy “posters” covering a hoarding near the row of red brick villas. More than once the boy’s thoughtless words had hurt the father’s heart. It was chiefly of Gwen that Murchison thought as he thrust the envelope with its yellow slips into his breast-pocket.

At Clovelly, Catherine, her sleeves turned up, stood in the little back kitchen making a suet-pudding. The Murchisons had dispensed with a servant because of the expense, for their income had practically no margin, and money had to be scraped together to pay the yearly dividend on the husband’s life-insurance. Catherine’s mother, a somewhat stern, pious, and bedridden old lady, living in a respectable south-coast town, allowed her daughter a small sum each year. Mrs. Pentherby was the possessor of a comfortable income, but suffered from a meanness of mind and a severity of prejudice that had made her rather merciless to Murchison in the hour of his misfortune. Such money as she sent was to be spent “solely on the children.” Catherine’s face had often reddened over the contents of her mother’s drastic and didactic letters. Her love and her loyalty were hurt by the old lady’s blunt and Puritanical advice. As for James Murchison, he had too much pride to ever dream of touching Mrs. Pentherby’s “ear-marked” donations to his children.

On several occasions a five-pound note had reached Clovelly anonymously from another quarter. Murchison had suspected Porteus Carmagee of this noiseless generosity, but he had been unable to discover whence the money came. The little lawyer of Lombard Street alone knew how the phenomenal damages accorded to Mrs. Baxter by a sentimental jury had swept away all Murchison’s savings, and even the money realized by the sale of his furniture and his car. Yet these five-pound notes were always placed in Catherine’s hands, to be deposited in the post-office savings-bank in Gwendolen Murchison’s name. At Christmas a huge hamper had reached them from Roxton, a hamper whose bulk had symbolized the abundant kindness of Miss Carmagee’s virgin heart. Friends in adversity are friends worthy of honor, and Miss Carmagee, good woman, had packed the hamper with her own fat and generous hands.

Catherine, her fore-arms white with flour, stood in the little back kitchen, tying a piece of cloth over the pudding-bowl before sinking it in the steaming saucepan on the fire. The winter day was drawing towards twilight. Mists hung over the black canal. Through the windows could be seen the zinc roofs of a number of storage sheds attached to the buildings of a steam-mill.

In the front parlor the horse-hair sofa had been drawn beneath the window, and Gwen, her golden head on a faded blue cushion, lay, trying a new frock on a great wax doll. The child’s eyes looked big and strange in her pale face, and the blue veins showed through the pearly skin. Apathy in a child is pathetic in its unnaturalness, the more so when the sparkle of health has but lately left the eager eyes. Gwen had whitened like a plant deprived of life. Her black-socked legs were no longer brown and chubby. She had the unanimated and drooping look of a child languid under the spell of some insidious disease.

The garden gate closed with a clash as Master Jack came crunching up the gravel-path, swinging his ragged school-books at the end of a strap. He grimaced at Gwen, and rang the bell with the cheerful verve of youth, for John Murchison was a sturdy ragamuffin, capable of adapting himself to changed surroundings. The young male is a creature of mental resilience and resource. Toys were fewer, puddings plainer, parties unknown. But a boy can find treasures in a rubbish heap and mystery in the dirty waters of a canal.

Master Jack’s return from school was usually a noisy incident. He appeared loud and emphatic, an infallible autocrat of eight.

“I say—I’m hungry.”

Bang went the books into a corner of the hall. For the hundredth time Catherine reproved her son, and insisted on Master Jack’s “primers” being put in order on the proper shelf. The boy, much under compulsion, stooped for those battered symbols of civilization, disclosing in the act a disastrous rent in his blue serge knickers.

“Jack, dear, what have you been doing to your clothes?”

“What clothes, mother?”

The boy’s innocent yet subtle obtuseness did not save him from further catechisation.

“I only mended your knickers yesterday, Jack, and they were new last month.”

“My knickers, mother!”

“What have you been doing?”

Master Jack passed a hypocritical hand over a certain region.

“Lor!”

“Don’t say ‘lor,’ dear.”

“Well, I never! I was only climbin’ with Bert Smith.”

“You don’t think, Jack, that clothes cost money.”

It was perfectly plain that no such thought ever entered Jack Murchison’s head. Children are serenely insensible to the worries of their elders, and, moreover, Master Jack had at the moment a grievance of his own.

“Bert Smith’s going to the pantomime,” and he pushed past his mother into the front room; swinging his books.

“Jack, be careful!”

“Why don’t we go to the pantomime? It’s a beastly shame!”

Catherine’s lips quivered almost imperceptibly. The blatant self-assertiveness of boyhood hurt her, as the thoughtless grumblings of a child must often hurt a mother.

“Put those books down, dear, and go and change your knickers.”

Jack obeyed, if swinging the books into a corner could be called obedience. Catherine restrained a gesture of impatience. Gwen, lying on the sofa, winced at the clatter as though morbidly sensitive to sounds.

“You are silly, Jack!”

“Shut up.”

“Muvver’s tired.”

Reproof from a supposed inferior is never particularly welcome. Jack made a clutch at his sister’s doll, landed it by one leg, and proceeded to dangle it head downward before the fire.

“Jack—Jack—don’t!”

The boy chuckled like a tyrant as Gwen, peevish and hypersensitive, burst into a flood of tears. Catherine, who had turned back into the kitchen, reappeared in time to rescue the doll from being melted.

“Jack, I am ashamed of you.”

She took the doll from him, and went to the window to comfort Gwen. John Murchison, conscious of humiliation, adopted an attitude of aggressive scorn.

“Silly old doll.”

“Jack, go up to the nursery.”

“Sha’n’t.”

His courage melted rather abruptly, however, before the look upon his mother’s face. He retreated at his leisure, climbed the stairs slowly, whistling as he went, and kicking the banisters with the toes of his boots.

A grieved voice reached Catherine from the half-dark landing.

“Mother?”

“Yes.”

“Why can’t we go to the pantomime?”

“Go into the nursery, dear, and don’t grumble.”

“Bert Smith’s going. I call it a beastly shame.”

“Jack, if you say another word I shall send you to bed.”

Five minutes had hardly elapsed before Catherine heard her husband’s footsteps on the path, and the rattle of his latch-key in the lock. In the front room he found poor Gwen still sobbing spasmodically in her mother’s arms.

The sight damped the glow on Murchison’s face.

“Hallo, what’s the matter?” and the anxious lines came back in his forehead.

“Nothing, dear, nothing.”

“Why, little one, what is it?”

Catherine surrendered her place to him. Murchison’s arms went round the child. Gwen, though struggling to be brave, broke out again into uncontrollable and helpless weeping.

“I—I’s tired, father.”

“Tired! there, there! You must not cry like this,” and the big man’s face was a study in troubled tenderness.

“What has upset her, Kate?”

He looked at his wife.

“Jack has been teasing her.”

“The young scoundrel.”

“The boy’s in one of his trying moods.” And she could find no more to say against her son.

Gwen grew comforted in her father’s arms. Yet to this man who had learned to watch the faces of the sick, there was something ominous in the child’s half-fretful eyes, in the way she flushed, and in the hurrying of her heart. He felt her hands; they were hot and feverish.

Husband and wife looked at each other.

“Tired, little one, eh?”

“Yes, very tired.”

She lay with her head on her father’s shoulder, looking with large, languid eyes up into his face.

“By-bye time for little girls who are going to see ‘Puss in Boots’ to-morrow.”

Gwen’s eyes brightened a little; her hands held the lappets of her father’s coat-collar.

“Oh—daddy!”

Murchison felt in his pocket and drew out the envelope with the yellow tickets.

“So you would like to see ‘Puss in Boots’?”

“Yes, oh yes.”

“Little girls who go to pantomimes must go to bed early. Shall daddy carry you up-stairs?”

A tired but ecstatic sigh accepted the condition. Murchison lifted the child, kissed her, and smiled sadly at his wife.

“What about your unregenerate son?”

Catherine turned, and called to Jack, who was listening at the nursery door.

“Jack, dear, you may come down.”

A clatter of feet pounded down the stairs.

“Quiet, dear, quiet.”

“Daddy, Bert Smith’s going to the pantomime.”

“He is, is he? Well, so are we.”

“To ‘Puss in Boots’?”

“Yes, if a certain young gentleman is good.”

Jack gave a shout of triumph, kissed Gwen, and skipped round the room as Murchison went out with his daughter in his arms.

The boy ran to Catherine, and jumped up to her embrace.

“I’m sorry, mother,” and his bright face vanquished her.

“Sorry, Jack?”

“I tore my knickers.”

And Catherine took the confession in the spirit that it was given.

CHAPTER XXII

Though the most agile of mock cats cut capers behind the foot-lights, and though forty fairies in green and crimson fluttered their gauzy wings under the paste-board trees, Gwen Murchison sat silent and solemn-eyed beside her father, while her brother shouted over the vagaries of Selina the Cook. The glitter, the kaleidoscopic color, the gaudy incidentalism of the mummery could charm only a transient light into Gwen's eyes. She sat beside Murchison, with one hot hand in his, her face shining like a white flower out of the depths of the crowded balcony.

"Daddy, I'm so tired."

They were in the theatre arcade with a great electric light blazing above their heads. People were pouring from the vestibule. A line of trams and cabs waited in the roadway to drain the human flood streaming out into the night.

"Tired, little one?"

"So tired, daddy! My head, it does ache."

Under the glare of the electric arc Murchison's face had a haggard look as he took Gwen up like a baby in his arms. Jack was hanging to his mother's hand, garrulous and ecstatic, a slab of warm chocolate browning his fingers.

"Let's go in the tram, mother."

Catherine was following her husband's powerful figure, as he pushed through the crowd with Gwen lying in his arms. Murchison had hailed a cab, a luxury that he had not allowed himself for many a long week. The wife caught a glimpse of her husband's face as he turned to her. There was something in his eyes that made her look at Gwen.

"I say, daddy, how that old—"

"Quiet, dear, quiet."

The boy's shrill voice died down abruptly. He looked puzzled, and a little offended, and began cramming chocolate into his mouth. Murchison had opened the cab door.

"Gwen?"

Catherine's eyes interrogated her husband.

"Get in, dear; can you take her from me? The child is dead tired."

Gwen appeared half asleep. Her eyes opened vaguely as her father lifted her into the cab.

"My head aches, muvver."

"Does it, dear?" and Catherine's arms drew close about her; "we shall soon be home."

"In with you, Jack."

The boy scrambled into a corner, fidgeted to and fro, and stared at his mother. Murchison followed him, closing the door gently, and putting up both windows, for the night was raw and cold. The cab rumbled away over the Wilton cobbles, the windows clattering like castanets, the light from the street-lamps flashing in rhythmically upon the faces of Catherine and her children. Murchison had sunk into his corner with a heavy sigh. The cab had a sense of smothering confinement for him. With the crunching wheels and the chattering windows, he was too conscious, through the oppressive restlessness of it all, of Gwen's tired and apathetic face.

"Don't, Jack, don't—"

The child stirred in her mother's arms with a peevish cry. Her brother, who had devoured his chocolate, had squirmed forward to tickle his sister's legs.

"Sit still."

Murchison's voice was fierce in its suppressed impatience. Jack crumbled into his corner, while his mother soothed Gwen and stroked her hair. A distant church clock chimed the quarter as the cab turned a corner slowly, and stopped before the blank-faced villa. Murchison climbed out and took Gwen from his wife's arms. He unlocked the door, and laid the child on the sofa by the window, before returning to pay the man his fare.

"How much?"

"Two bob, sir."

Murchison felt in his pockets, and brought out a shilling, a sixpence, and two half-pennies. The little cash-box in Catherine's desk had to be unlocked before the cab rattled away, leaving a solitary candle burning in the front room of Clovelly.

In half an hour the two children were in bed; Gwen feverish, restless, Jack reduced to silence by his father's quiet but unquestionable authority. Murchison examined Gwen anxiously as she lay with her curls gathered up by a blue ribbon. He made her up a light draught of bromide, sweetened it with sugar, and persuaded the child to drink it down. Master Jack Murchison was ordered to lie as quiet as a mouse. Then Catherine and her husband went down to a plain and rather dismal supper, cold boiled mutton, rice-pudding, bread and cheese.

When the meal was over, Catherine glided up-stairs to look at Gwen. She found both children asleep. Jack curled up like a puppy, the girl flushed, but breathing peacefully. In the dining-room Murchison had drawn an arm-chair before the fire, and was stirring the dull coal into a blaze. He glanced uneasily over his shoulder as he heard his wife's step upon the threshold. Catherine was struck by his lined and thoughtful face.

"Well?"

"Both asleep."

Her husband continued to stir the fire, his eyes catching a restless gleam from the wayward flicker of the flames.

"I am bothered about the child, Kate."

"Yes."

She turned a chair from the table.

"This last month—"

"You have noticed the change?"

“Yes, dear.”

“So have I.”

He rested his elbows on his knees, and sat close over the fire, moving the poker to and fro as though beating time.

“She has lost flesh and color. There is a swollen gland in the neck, too. This beast of a town, I suppose, with its dirt and smoke. Thank God, the boy seems fit enough.”

He spoke slowly, yet with an emphatic curtness that might have suggested lack of feeling to a sentimentalist. Catherine sat in silence, watching him with troubled eyes.

“Do you suspect anything?”

“Suspect?”

He turned sharply, and she could see the nervous twitching of his brows.

“Anything serious? Oh—James, don’t keep me in ignorance.”

She slipped from her chair, and sat down beside him on the hearth-rug, leaning against his knees.

“The child is out of health, dear. It may mean anything or nothing. I am wondering”—and he stopped with a tired sigh—“whether we can give her a change of air.”

“Dear, why not?”

She met his eyes, and colored.

“That is—”

“If we can find the money.”

Catherine pretended not to notice the humiliating bitterness in his voice.

“It can be managed. I think mother would take Gwen. I’m sure she would take her.”

Murchison smiled the unpleasant, cynical smile of a man unwilling to ask a favor.

“Grandparents are always more merciful to their grandchildren,” he said; “I suppose because there is less responsibility.”

Catherine reached for his hand, and drew it down into her bosom.

“I will write at once, James, if you are willing.”

“I have no right to object.”

“Object!”

“Beggars are not choosers.”

“James, don’t.”

“I realize my position, dear, and I accept it as a law of nature.”

Her face, wistful with a wealth of unshed tears, appealed to him for mercy towards himself.

“Don’t let us talk of it. Oh, James, why should we? Then, I may write to mother?”

“Yes.”

She knelt up and kissed him.

“Beloved, if Gwen should die!”

Life was a somewhat monotonous affair at Dr. Tugler’s dispensary. Method was essential to the management of such a business, for there was more of the commercial enterprise in Dr. Tugler’s profession than a wilful idealist could have wished. Surgery hours began at eight, and Dr. Tugler’s was a punctual personality. Day in, day out, he bustled into the red-windowed front room as the hand of the clock came to the hour. Nothing but the most flagrant necessity was permitted to interfere with the precision of his practice. And since John Tugler did not spare his own body, it was not reasonable that he should spare those who worked for hire.

It was March 2d, a Tuesday, with a wet fog clogging the streets, when James Murchison arrived at the dispensary as the clock struck nine. The front room, packed as to its benches, steamed like a stable. The indescribable odor that emanates from the clothes of the poor made the air heavy with the smell of the unwashed slums.

Dr. Tugler glanced up briskly as the big man entered, screwed up his mouth, nodded, and jerked an elbow in the direction of the clock.

“Bustle along, Mr. Murchison. There are half a dozen cases waiting for you in the surgery.”

Murchison said nothing, but passed on. His face had a white, drawn look, and he seemed to move half-blindly, like a man exhausted by a long march in the sun.

Tugler looked at him curiously, frowned, and then rattled off a string of directions to an old woman seated beside him, her red hands clutching the old leather bag in her lap.

“Medicine three times a day—before meals. Drop the drink. Regular food. Come again next week. Shilling? That’s right. Next—please.”

The old woman’s sodden face still poked itself towards the doctor with senile eagerness.

“I ’ope you won’t be minding me, sir, but this ’ere—”

Dr. Tugler became suddenly deaf.

“Next, please.”

There was something in the atmosphere suggestive of a barber’s shop. A robust collier was already waiting for the old lady to vacate her chair.

“I was goin’ to ask you, doctor—”

“This time next week. We’re busy. Good-morning, Smith; sit down.”

The woman licked a drooping lip with a sharp, dry tongue, looked at the doctor dubiously, and began to fumble in her bag.

“I’ve got a box of pills ’ere, sir, as—”

“Hem.”

Tugler cleared his throat irritably, and appeared surprised to find her still sitting at his elbow.

“Pills?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What for?”

“The bowels, sir.”

“Need ’em?”

“Well, sir, as I might say, sir, I’m obstinate, very obstinate—”

“Let’s look at the box.”

“You don’t be thinkin’, doctor, there’s any ’arm?”

“Harm! Bread and ginger. Take the lot. Sit down, Smith,” and Dr. Tugler’s emphasis ended the discussion with the finality of fate.

When the room had cleared, and the last bottle had been passed through the dispensary window, that opened like the window of a railway booking-office into the alley at the side of the shop, Dr. Tugler marched into the surgery where Murchison had finished syringing the wax out of an old man’s ears.

“Overslept yourself, Murchison? I must buy you an alarum, you know, if it happens again.”

Murchison was washing his hands at the tap over the sink.

“No,” he said, “I was up half the night.”

John Tugler, cheerful little bully that he was, noticed the sag of the big man’s shoulders, and the peculiar harshness of his voice.

“Get through with it all right?”

Murchison stared momentarily at Dr. Tugler over his shoulder, a glance that had the significance of the flash of a drawn sword.

“It was not one of your cases,” he said.

“Private affair, eh?”

“My child is ill.”

“Your child?”

“Yes; I’m a bit worried, that’s all.”

Murchison turned the tap off with a jerk, rasped the dirty towel round the roller, and began to dry his hands as though he were trying to crush something between his palms. Dr. Tugler thrust out a lower lip, looked hard at Murchison, and fidgeted his fists in his trousers-pockets.

“What’s the matter?”

The big man’s silence suggested for a moment that he resented the abruptness of the question.

“Can’t say—yet.”

“Serious?”

“I’m afraid so, yes.”

Dr. Tugler frowned a little, stared hard at the ventilator, and pulled his hands out of his pockets with a jerk.

“Look here, Murchison, you’ve lost your nerve a little. I’ll come round and have a look at the youngster. You had better knock off work to-day.”

“Thanks, I’d rather stick to it. You might see the child, though. I—”

“Well?”

Murchison had turned his face away, and was standing by the window, fumbling with his cuff links.

“I don’t like the look of things. I don’t know why, but a man’s nerve seems to go when he’s doctoring his own kin.”

“That’s so,” and Dr. Tugler nodded.

“Then you’ll come round?”

“Supposing we go at once?”

“It’s good of you.”

“Bosh.”

And Dr. Tugler turned into the front room, took his top-hat from the gas bracket, and began to polish it with his sleeve.

CHAPTER XXIII

A March wind blew the dust and dead leaves in eddies through the breadth of Castle Gate as Dr. Steel’s brougham drew up before the timbered front of a Jacobean house. The mellow building with its carved barge-boards and great sweeping gables bore the date of 1617, and still carried a weather-worn sign swinging on an iron bracket. For the last fifty years the ground floor had been used as a grocery shop, a dim, rambling cavern of a place fragrant with the scent of coffee and spices. The proprietor, Mr. Isaac Mainprice, a very superior tradesman who dabbled in archæology, had refrained from gilt lettering above the door; nor did the quaint leaded windows glare with advertisements, whiskey bottles, and Dutch cheeses. Every one within ten miles of Roxton knew Mr. Mainprice. His prosperity did not need to be flaunted upon his windows.

“Good-day, madam. Terribly windy. Permit me.”

Mrs. Betty had swept across the pavement in her sables, an opulent figure wooed by the March wind. Mr. Mainprice had fussed forward in person. He bowed in his white apron, swung a chair forward, and then dodged behind the counter. The shop was empty, and three melancholy assistants studied Mrs. Betty from behind pyramids of sweetmeats and packages of tea, for the face under the white toque had all the imperative fascination of smooth and confident beauty.

Mrs. Steel drew out a little ivory memorandum-book, and glanced at it perfunctorily, before looking up into Mr. Mainprice’s attentive face. He was a weak-eyed, damp-haired man, with a big nose and a loose, good-tempered mouth. A patch of red on either cheek seemed to suggest that the *épicier* cultivated an authoritative taste in port, sherry, and Madeira.

“I want some jellies and soups, Mr. Mainprice.”

“Certainly, madam.”

“There are a few poor people my husband attends. I want to help them with a few little delicacies.”

Mrs. Betty's drawl was most confidentially sympathetic, and Mr. Mainprice ducked approvingly behind the counter.

"What brand, madam? Lazenby's, Cross & Blackwell's—?"

"Oh—the best—what you recommend."

"Thank you, madam."

"Let me see," and Mrs. Betty's eyes wandered with an air of delightful innocence about the shop; "I like the glassed jellies best. Six. Yes, six. And six tins of desiccated soup."

"Certainly, madam. The large size?"

"Yes. Will you have them made up into different parcels? I will take them in the carriage."

"Certainly, madam."

Mr. Mainprice nodded sharply to the three melancholy assistants, and then bent over the counter to scribble in his order-book.

"Very windy weather, madam."

Mrs. Betty glanced up brightly at the suave, thin-whiskered face, and smiled. She had a great variety of smiles, and Mr. Mainprice was an intelligent person, and a man who was not ashamed of wearing a white apron. Moreover, he was an excellent patient, the father of five tall and unhealthy daughters, and the sympathetic husband of a neurasthenic wife.

"Terribly windy," she agreed. "This is a dear old house, but I suppose it is rather draughty."

"No, madam, no, we find it very comfortable. I have had double windows fitted to the upper rooms."

"They make such a difference."

"Such a difference, madam."

There was a short pause. Mr. Mainprice was a nervous man. He had a habit of sniffing, and of opening and shutting his order-book as though it was imperative for him to keep his hands occupied.

"Dr. Steel is very busy, madam?"

"Oh, very busy; so much influenza."

"I am afraid, madam," and Mr. Mainprice elongated himself over the counter with a waggish side twist of the head—"I am afraid we selfish people don't show Dr. Steel much mercy."

Mrs. Betty laughed.

"I believe you yourself have been particularly wicked this winter, Mr. Mainprice."

"I must plead guilty, madam."

"You are quite well now, I hope?"

Mr. Mainprice frowned, and half shut one eye.

"Nearly well, madam. I ventured out last night without orders."

"The Primrose League Concert?"

"Now, madam, you have found me out!"

Mrs. Betty and the *épicier* regarded each other with a sympathetic sense of humor.

"We were there, Mr. Mainprice, and I was so annoyed because Dr. Steel was called away just before your daughter sang."

"Indeed, madam," and Mr. Mainprice sniffed with nervous satisfaction.

"The best item on the programme. Such a sweet contralto, and such musical feeling. I remember poor Mrs. Murchison used to sing some of the same songs. Of course she never had your daughter's artistic instinct."

Mr. Mainprice colored, and looked coy.

"The girl has had first-class lessons, Mrs. Steel. I believe in having the best of everything. I have been very fortunate, madam, and though I ought not to mention it, money is no consideration."

The grocer straightened his back suddenly, with a mild snigger of self-salutation.

"Money well spent, Mr. Mainprice—"

"Is money invested, madam. Exactly. And a good education is an investment in these days."

Two of the melancholy assistants were carrying the parcels to Mrs. Betty's carriage. She rose with a rustle of silks, her rich fur jacket setting off her slim but sensuous figure. Mr. Mainprice dodged from behind the counter, and preceded her to the door.

"If it will be any convenience, Mrs. Steel, we can deliver the parcels immediately."

"Thank you, I want to see the people myself. I like to keep in touch with the poor, Mr. Mainprice."

The grocer's weak eyes honored a ministering angel.

"Exactly, madam. Permit me—"

He edged through the door with a nervous clearing of the throat, blinked as the wind blew a cloud of dust across the road, and escorted my Lady Bountiful to her carriage.

"What address, madam?"

"Thank you so much, Mr. Mainprice, the coachman knows."

And Mr. Mainprice stood on the curb for fully ten seconds, watching Dr. Steel's brougham bear this most charming lady upon her round of Christian kindness and pity.

It is wise in this world to cultivate a reputation for philanthropy, though like the priestly dress it may be a mere sanctity of the surface. Few people are honest enough to be open egotists, and to attain our ends it is necessary to skilfully bribe our neighbors' prejudices. Though self-interest is the motive power that keeps the world from flagging, it is neither discreet nor cultured to blatantly acknowledge such a truth, for without a certain measure of hypocrisy life would be a sorry scramble. That man should be taught to love his neighbor as himself is both admirable and inspiring, and yet no one who respects his banking account could ever seriously accept so unbusiness-like a theory. There was more shrewd, honest, and unflinching truth-telling in Hobbes than in the vaporings of a flimsy sentimentalism.

Now Mrs. Betty had no more love for a washerwoman sick with a carbuncle on her neck than she had for an old and mildewed boot. Poverty and the inevitable sordidness thereof were more than

distasteful to her, and yet she was so far sound in her worldly philosophy as to dissemble her distaste for expediency's sake. It is never foolish to be suspected of generosity. And in Roxton, where the ladies counted one another's yearly record as to hats, it was necessary to assume some sort of benignant attitude towards the heathen or the poor. Betty Steel, as the leading physician's wife, recognized the power of judicious and moral self-advertisement. She had lived down her mischievous desire to shock the good people who paid her husband's pleasant bills. No doubt she derived some delicate satisfaction from playing the fair lady in her furs, and from conferring favors on her humbler neighbors. The sense of superiority is always pleasant. That man is a liar who describes himself as utterly indifferent to obloquy or favor.

Mrs. Betty stopped at a florist's shop on her way and bought three bundles of Scilla flowers. The golden blooms made a kind of splendor beside her sable coat. Colonel Feveril, Roxton's most antique dandy, passed as she returned towards her brougham, and the brisk sweep of the soldier's hat saved her the trouble of remembering her mirror.

At the top of one of the alleys leading to the river, Dr. Steel's wife disembarked upon her errand of mercy. A small boy whipping a top on the narrow sidewalk served as a porter for the carrying of her jellies. One or two greasy heads were poked out of the pigeon-holes of windows. Mrs. Betty, demure and sweet as any Dorcas, knocked at the door of No. 5.

"Good-day, Mrs. Ripstone."

An elderly woman in a faded blue flannel blouse had thrust a beak of a nose round the edge of the door.

"Good-day, ma'am."

The thin, hard face offered no very fulsome welcome.

"How is your husband? Dr. Steel told me yesterday that he was a little better."

Mrs. Ripstone's lethargic eyes rested for a moment on the small boy carrying the parcels. Mrs. Betty herself bore the golden flowers.

"Much obliged, ma'am; my 'usband is doin' as well as can be expected. Will you step in? We ain't particular tidy."

Mrs. Betty stepped in, and sat down calmly on a very rickety chair.

"I have brought you a little soup, and two glasses of jelly."

"Much obliged to you, ma'am."

The two women looked curiously at each other. They were utterly unlike in any characteristic. Mrs. Betty in her furs looked like a Russian countess in the hovel of a peasant.

The room was unconditionally dirty, and smelled of burned fat. There was nothing to admire in it, nothing to provide the lady with a subject for enthusiasm.

"I am glad your husband is better, Mrs. Ripstone."

"Thank you, ma'am."

The woman in the blue blouse stood stolidly by the table. Mrs. Betty's words made no evident impression on her. It was as though she regarded the visit as a necessary evil, and was only persuaded to be polite by such tangible blessings as might accrue.

"Have you any children?"

Mrs. Ripstone stared.

"Ten, ma'am."

Her brevity was expressive.

"You must be very busy."

"I am that, ma'am."

"Are they all grown up?"

"Grow'd up?"

"Yes."

"Well, ma'am," and the woman in the blue blouse gave a peculiar smile, "if you'll listen you'll 'ear the baby 'ammerin' a tin pot in the yard."

The reek of the burned fat began to prove too powerful for Mrs. Betty's sensitive soul. She and Mrs. Ripstone seemed out of sympathy. Conversation languished. The lady, with all her cleverness, was wholly at a loss what to say next.

Two minutes had passed when Dr. Steel's wife rose. She smiled one of her perfunctory smiles at the woman in the blue blouse, and turned with a rustling petticoat towards the door.

"I hope your husband will like the soup, Mrs. Ripstone."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Good-afternoon."

"Good-afternoon, ma'am."

The woman watched Mrs. Betty to her carriage, and then closed the door with an expression of rather sour relief. She turned to the flowers and parcels on the table, untied the string, and examined the contents.

"Wonder what she's left 'em for;" such was Mrs. Ripstone's solitary and cynical remark.

In her carriage Mrs. Betty was holding an enamelled scent-bottle to her nose.

"I wonder why they are so dirty and so reserved," she thought; "I don't think that woman was the least bit grateful. I don't like the poor. Anyway, I have done my duty."

The west was wreathed with the torn crimson of a wind-blown sky at sunset when Mrs. Betty drove home from her essay in almsgiving. St. Antonia's spire, a black and slender wedge, seemed to cleave the vastness of the flaming west. The tall elms about the church were very restless with the wailing of the wind.

In Parker Steel's dining-room there was an air of warmth and luxury, a sense of deep shelter from the blustering melancholy of the dying day. The table was laid for tea, a silver kettle singing above the spirit-lamp, a plate of hot cakes on the trivet before the piled-up fire. It was the hour of soft, slanting shadows, and of the wayward yet sleepy flickering of the flames. Betty swept into the room with the sensuous satisfaction of a cat. The thick Turkey carpet muffled her footsteps like the

moss of a forest “ride.”

At the window, his figure outlined by the gold and purple of a fading sky, she saw her husband standing motionless, his head bent forward over an out-stretched hand. He appeared to be examining something closely in the twilight. She could see his keen, clear profile, intent and a little stern.

“Parker, Parker, the cakes are burning!”

Her husband turned with a start, taken unawares, like the hero of Wessex in the swineherd’s hut. Betty Steel had glided towards the fire.

“Preoccupation—thy name is man! Parker, quick, your handkerchief. The dish is as hot as—Say something, do.”

Before the glow of the fire she noticed the irritable frown upon her husband’s face.

“Most worried of men, what is the matter?”

“Matter!”

“Fate cannot touch us, the cakes are saved. Misery, Parker! Quick, the kettle!”

The silver spout was spouting hot water over Mrs. Betty’s treasured Japanese tray. Her husband with a “damn the thing,” turned down the cap of the spirit-lamp with a spoon.

“What an infernal fool that girl Symons is!”

Mrs. Betty drew a chair forward with her foot, reached for the tea-caddy, and glanced whimsically across the table at her much grieved mate.

“The king did not try to shift the responsibility, Parker.”

Dr. Steel sat down abruptly, with the air of a man in no mood for persiflage.

“What were you studying so intently?”

“I?”

“Learning palmistry?”

Parker Steel helped himself to one of the hot cakes.

“Oh, nothing,” he said, curtly.

His wife laughed.

“What a retort to give a woman!”

The physician shifted his chair.

“Really, Betty, am I to go into a lengthy dissertation on every trifle because you happen to be inquisitive?”

“Tell me the trifle, and you shall have your tea.”

“I was looking at a chilblain on my finger.”

“What admirable bathos, Parker! I might have taken you for Hamlet soliloquizing for the last time over Ophelia’s tokens.”

“Oh, quite possibly,” and he began to sip his tea; “you have forgotten the sugar. What execrable memories you women have!”

CHAPTER XXIV

“Daddy, my head, my head!”

“Lie quiet, little one. Hold her hands, Kate. Drink it all down, Gwen.”

“I can’t! Daddy, my head, oh, my head!”

Dr. John Tugler, standing before the nursery window, bit one corner of his mustache, and stared hard at the chimney of the steam-mill trailing a plume of smoke across the dull gray of the sky. The monotonous cooing of a dove came from a wooden cage hung in the back yard of the next-door house. A hundred yards away an iron railway bridge crossed the canal, and the thunder of each passing train made peace impossible in the little villa.

Dr. Tugler pulled down the blind.

“Beast of a back room,” he thought; “they must wring the neck of that confounded bird.”

He turned, and stood looking in silence at the two figures bending over the little bed. Catherine had one arm under the child’s head, and was smoothing back the hair from Gwen’s forehead. The child’s eyes were closed, her face flushed. Tugler saw her turn restlessly from her mother’s arm, as though the least touch was feverishly resented.

“Don’t, don’t—”

“There, dear, there!”

The look in the mother’s eyes betrayed how sharply such an innocent repulse could wound.

“Come, Gwen, darling.”

“I should let her rest, dear.”

Murchison’s voice was peculiarly quiet. He was standing at the foot of the bed, bending forward a little over the bar, his eyes fixed on the face of the child.

Dr. Tugler moved softly from the window. His habitual bluster had disappeared completely. His full blue eyes looked dull and puzzled.

“Not much of a room—this,” he said, apologetically, touching Murchison’s elbow.

The father turned and looked at him with the slow and almost stupid stare of a man suffering from shock.

“I suppose it isn’t.”

“We can move her to the front room.”

Catherine had caught John Tugler’s meaning. She was kneeling beside the bed, her eyes fixed on the little man’s plebeian but good-natured face.

“Move her, Mrs. Murchison.”

“At once?”

“Yes. She must be kept absolutely quiet; no light, no noise.”

Catherine looked at him almost helplessly. A train was clanging over the iron bridge, and the caged dove cooed irrepressibly, a living symbol of vexatious sentimentalism.

"There will be less noise in the front room."

Her husband nodded.

"We can have straw put down."

"And tell the next-door people to strangle that confounded pigeon."

"I will ask them."

"And remember, no light."

A shrill cry came from the sick child's lips, as though driven from her by some sudden flaring up of pain.

"My head, my head! Muvver—"

Catherine's hands flashed out to Gwen, hovering, as though fearing to touch the fragile thing she loved. She tried to soothe the child, a woman whose wounded tenderness overflowed in a flood of broken and disjointed words. Her husband watched her, his firm mouth loosened into a mute and poignant tremor of distress.

Tugler touched him on the shoulder.

"Let's go down."

Murchison straightened, and followed the doctor to the door. He looked back for a moment, and saw Catherine's head, a dull gleam of gold above the child's flushed face. A strange shock of awe ran through him, like the deep in-drawing of a breath before some picture that tells of tears. His vision blurred as he closed the door, and followed John Tugler slowly down the stairs.

Both men were silent for a moment in the little front room of Clovelly. Tugler had taken his stand between the sofa and the table, and was watching Murchison out of the angles of his eyes. He was accustomed to dealing with ignorant people, but here he had to satisfy a man whose professional education had been far better than his own.

"Why didn't you tell me of this before, Murchison?"

"Tell you what?"

"About the child."

Murchison glanced at him blankly.

"Well, it was my own affair."

"Didn't like to bother any one, eh? You never ought to have kept the youngster in this beast of a town. I could have told you a lot about Wilton if you had asked."

John Tugler, like many amiable but rather coarse-fibred people, was often most brusque when meaning to be kind. Moreover, he had a certain measure of authority to maintain, and for the maintenance of authority it was customary for him to wax aggressive.

"I tried to get the child away."

Murchison spoke monotonously, yet with effort.

"We wrote to her grandmother, but the old lady was ill, and put us off with excuses. The child was only ailing then. It was a matter of money. The only money I could lay my hands on was a small sum deposited with the post-office in the child's own name. And when I got the money—I saw that it would be no good."

The florid little man looked sincerely vexed.

"You ought to have mentioned it," he said—"you ought to have mentioned it. I'm not so damned stingy as not to give a brother practitioner's child a chance."

Murchison lifted his head.

"Thanks," he said. "I suppose it is too late now?"

His eyes met Dr. Tugler's. The grim question in that look demanded the sheer truth. John Tugler understood it, and met it like a man.

"We can't move her now," he said.

"No."

It is incredible what meaning a single word can carry. With Murchison that "no" meant the surrender of a life.

Dr. Tugler stared out of the window, and rattled his keys.

"Did you notice the squint?" he asked, softly.

"Yes."

"And the retraction of the head? She's been sick, too: cerebral vomiting. Damn the disease, I've seen too much of it!"

Murchison's face might have been sculptured by Michael Angelo.

"Then you think it is that?" he asked, dully.

"Tubercular meningitis?"

"Yes."

John Tugler nodded.

There was a short and distraught silence before the little man picked up his hat. He smoothed it gently with the sleeve of his coat. Murchison stood motionless, staring at the floor.

"Look here, Murchison."

He glanced up and met the other man's dull eyes.

"You can't work to-day. It doesn't signify. And about the cash—"

"Thanks, but—"

"Now, now, we're not going to quarrel, are we? The work's been pretty thick this winter. I'm rather thinking you've done rather more than your share. It would make things more comfortable, now—wouldn't it?"

Murchison gave a kind of groan.

"It's good of you, Tugler."

"Oh, bosh, man! Am I a bit of flint? Call it another pound a week. It isn't much at that. I'll send you a fiver on account."

He gave his hat a last rub, crammed it on his head, and walked hurriedly towards the door.

"It's good of you, Tugler. I—"

"All right. I don't want it talked about."

The little man was already in the hall, and fumbling for the handle of the front door. He opened it, slipped out like a guilty debtor, and crunched down the gravel, swearing to himself after the manner of the egregious male.

CHAPTER XXV

The windows of Parker Steel's consulting-room looked out on the garden at the back of the house, where Lent lilies were already swinging their golden heads over borders of crocuses, purple, yellow, and white. The lower part of the window was screened by a wire gauze blind, and the red serge curtains were looped back close to the shutters.

However drab and dismal it may be, a physician's consulting-room has much of the mystery that shadows the confessional of the priest. The uninitiated enter with a pleasurable sense of awe. Wisdom seems to admonish them from her temple of text-books piled up solemnly in the professional bookcase. There is an air of suave confidence and quiet reserve about the room. Even the usual Turkey carpet suggests comfortable sympathy and the touch of the healing hand.

Even as it is unnatural to suspect a priest of the sins he rebukes in others, so to the lay mind the physician appears as a being above the diseases that he treats. There is always something illogical in a doctor needing his own physic. And yet of all men he is the last that can boast of the bliss of ignorance. He knows the curses that afflict man in the flesh, how grim and inevitable his own end may be. He is too well aware of the malignant significance of symptoms, and a month of dyspepsia may reduce him to a state of morbid and half hypocondriacal self-introspection. It is told of a great surgeon how he lay awake all through one night imagining that he had discovered an aneurism of his aorta. It is dangerous to know too little, but on occasions it may be desperately unpleasant to know too much.

It was a serious and rather worried figure that moved to and fro in the lofty room, as the March day drew towards a dreary close. The house was silent, a depressing silence, suggestive of stagnation and cynical melancholy. A fitful wind set the tops of the cypress-trees swaying and jerking in the garden. The only living thing visible from Dr. Steel's window was a black cat stalking birds under the shadow of a bank of laurels.

Parker Steel had taken off his coat and folded it carefully over the back of a chair. He stood by the window, fumbling at his cuff-links, a preoccupied frown pinching up the skin of his forehead above the thin, acquisitive nose. After turning up his shirt-sleeves, he picked up a pocket-lens from the table and focused the light upon the forefinger of his right hand.

The hand that held the lense trembled very perceptibly. On the right forefinger, immediately above the base of the nail, a dull red papule stood out upon the skin. It was clearly circumscribed in outline, and hard to the touch. Parker Steel noticed all these details with the strained air of a man scrutinizing an unpleasant statement of accounts.

Presently he laid the lens down on the flap of the bureau by the window, and, unbuttoning his waistcoat, passed his left hand under his shirt and vest. The deft fingers half buried themselves in the hollow of his right armpit. Parker Steel's eyes had a peculiar, hard, staring look, the expression seen in the eyes of the expert whose whole intelligence is concentrated for the moment in the sense of touch. His lower lip fell away slightly from his teeth. Sharp lines of strain were visible upon his forehead.

"Good Lord!"

The words escaped from him involuntarily as he drew his hand out from under his shirt. The smooth face had grown suddenly haggard and sallow, and there was a glint of ugly fear in the eyes. Parker Steel stood staring at his hand, his mouth open, the lips softening as the lips of a coward soften when his manhood melts before some physical ordeal. The dapper figure has lost its alertness, its neat and confident symmetry, and had become the loose and slouching figure of a man suffering from shock.

Parker Steel roused himself at last, forced back his shoulders, and walked slowly towards the door. He turned the key in the lock, and stood listening a moment before picking up a hand-mirror from among the multifarious books and papers on the table. Returning to the window, he peered at the reflection of his own face, furtively, as though dreading what he might discover. The sallow skin was blemishless as yet. Not a spot or blur showed from the line of the hair to the clean curve of the well-shaven chin.

In another minute Parker Steel was turning over the leaves of his journal with impetuous fingers. He worked back page by page, running a finger down each column of names, stopping ever and again to recollect and reconsider. It was on a page dated "February 12th" that he discovered an entry that gave him the final pause.

"Mrs. Rattan, 10 Ford Street. Partus, 5 A.M."

A foot-note had been added at the bottom of the page, a foot-note whose details were significant to the point of proof.

Parker Steel threw the book upon the table.

"Good Lord!"

He looked round him like a man who has taken poison unwittingly, and whose brain refuses to act under the paralyzing pressure of fear. He, Parker Steel, a—! Physician and egoist that he was, he could not bring himself to think the word, to brand himself with the poor fools who crowd the

hospitals of great cities. The very vision, a hundred visions such as he had seen in the dingy “out-patient rooms” of old, made the instinct of cleanliness in him sicken and recoil. For Parker Steel had much of the delicate niceness of a cat. This sense of unutterable pollution struck at his vanity and his self-respect.

He moved close to the window, and stood staring over the wire blind into the garden.

Was it not possible that he might be mistaken? He could consult an expert. And yet in the inmost corners of his heart he knew that the truth was merciless towards him.

What then?

The question threw him into a more desperate dilemma. He remembered his wife.

Again, his profession? He would have to abandon it for one year, perhaps for two. And Parker Steel knew that success in professional life is largely a matter of personality. Withdraw that individual power, and the whole structure, like the city of an Eastern fable, may melt abruptly into mist.

Baffled and irritated, a man with no great moral hold on the deeper truths of life, he moved aimlessly about the room, holding his right hand a little from him like one with bleeding fingers, who fears the blood may stain his clothes. The leather-padded consulting-chair stood empty before the table. Parker Steel dropped into it by the casual chance of habit, and sat staring dully at the patterning of the paper on the wall.

It was the ordeal of an egoist unlightened by a signal sense of self-abnegation or of public duty. Mercenary motives and professional ambition prompted a compromise at any hazard. The temptation to procrastinate is ever with us, and the man of the polite world is the most ingenious of sophists. For more than half an hour Parker Steel sat silent and almost motionless in his chair. When he at last left it, it was with the air of a man to whom sanity, the sanity of the self-centred ego, had returned after the hideous doubt and discord of a dream.

The wisest course was for him to temporize, seeing that it was possible that he might be mistaken.

He recognized no immediate need for trusting any one with mere suspicions.

Was he not a physician, and therefore wise as to all precautions?

As for his wife? That was a problem that might have to be considered.

The sound of the front door closing roused him to the needs of the impending present. He noticed to his surprise that it was growing dark, and that the room was full of deepening shadows.

“Is Dr. Steel in, Symons?”

It was his wife’s voice, and Parker Steel slipped into his coat and unlocked the door.

“Tea nearly ready, dear?”

“Parker, are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Any one with you?”

“No. I will be with you in a minute.”

He groped for a box of matches on the mantel-shelf and lit the gas. Turning, he was startled by the reflection of his own white face staring at him mistrustfully from the mirror over the fire. It was as though Parker Steel shirked the glance of his own eyes. He had a sense of unflattering discomfort and deceit as he walked to a glass-fronted cabinet fitted with drawers that stood in one corner of the room.

They were in the middle of tea when Betty Steel glanced at her husband’s hand.

“Have you hurt yourself, Parker?”

“I?”

“Yes. Ah, the bathotic chilblain, of course! Has it broken?”

Her husband felt afraid behind his mask of casual indifference.

“I must have rasped the skin and got some dirt into the place,” he said. “A mere nothing. I have just put on this finger-stall. So you have heard that the De la Mottes are leaving, eh? They were not much good in the town, so far as the practice was concerned?”

Parker Steel’s reply to his wife’s question had flashed a suggestive gleam across his mind. Very probably it was too late for him to defend her against himself. And even if his fears proved true, he could swear absolute ignorance as to the presence of the disease. No guilt attached to him. He was merely striving to neutralize the effects of a damnable and undeserved misfortune.

CHAPTER XXVI

James Murchison, walking along the pavement of Wilton High Street with the sharp, savage strides of a man tortured by his own thoughts, turned into Dr. Tugler’s surgery as the clock struck eight, finding in this stern routine a power to steady him against despair. He slipped off his overcoat, folded it slowly and methodically over the back of a bench, and hung his hat on one of the gas brackets projecting from the wall. To John Tugler, who was seated at one of the tables, examining a girl with a red rash covering her face, there was something in the big man’s slow and restrained patience that betrayed how sorrow was shadowing his assistant’s home.

John Tugler pushed back his chair, and crossed the room to the corner where Murchison was bending over his open instrument bag. The droop of the shoulders, the whole pose of the powerful figure, told of the burden that lay heavy upon the father’s heart.

“Murchison.”

The face that met John Tugler’s was haggard and stupid with two sleepless nights.

“Yes.”

“Any news?”

“Oh—worse,” and he snapped the bag to with an irritable closure of the hands.

John Tugler looked at him as he might have looked at a refractory friend.

"Come now, Murchison, you're feeling damned bad. Knock off to-day. Stileman and I can manage."

"Thanks. I must work."

"Must, eh?"

"It helps."

"Like punching something when you're savage. Perhaps you're right."

Tugler returned to the girl with the red rash, while Murchison passed on to the surgery, where some half-score patients were waiting to be treated.

"Good-morning," and he glanced round him like a man in a hurry; "first case. Well, how's the leg?"

A scraggy, undersized individual with a narrow, swarthy face was pulling up a trousers leg with two dirty, drug-stained hands. He was a worker in a chemical factory, and his ugly, harsh, and suspicious features seemed to have taken the low moral stamp of the place.

"No worse, doct'r."

"No worse! Well, have you been resting?"

"Half an' half."

"I suppose so. You may as well come here and grumble for months unless you do what we tell you. It is quite useless continuing like this."

He bent down and began to unwind the dirty bandage from the man's leg. The chemical worker expanded the broad nostrils of his carnivorous nose, sniffed, and cocked a battered bowler onto the back of his head. Manners were not mended in Dr. Tugler's surgery.

"God's truth, doct'r, easy with it—"

Murchison had stripped a sodden pad of lint and plaster from the ulcer on the man's leg.

"Nonsense; that didn't hurt you."

"Beg to differ, sir."

"When did you dress this last?"

The patient hesitated, eying Murchison sulkily as though tempted to be insolent.

"Yesterday."

"Speak the truth and say three days ago. You're on your 'club'—of course."

"Well, what's the harm?"

"And you don't trouble much how long you draw club-money, eh?"

"That's your business, I reckon."

"My business, is it? Well, my friend, you carry out my instructions or there will be trouble about the certificate. You understand?"

The man cast an evil look at Murchison's broad back as he turned to spread boracic ointment on clean lint.

"I don't know as how I come here to hear your sauce," he remarked, curtly.

Murchison faced him with an irritable glitter of the eyes.

"What do you mean!"

"I suppose some of us poor fellows cost you gentlemen too much in tow and flannel."

"There you are just a little at sea, my friend. What we do is to prevent the Friendly Societies being imposed upon by loafers. Dress your leg every day. Rest it, you understand, and keep out of the pubs. You had better come by some manners before next week."

The chemical worker snarled out some vague retort, and then relapsed into silence. Such shufflers had no pity from James Murchison. He was in no mood that morning to bear with the impertinences of malingerers and humbugs.

The clock struck eleven before the last patient passed out into Wilton High Street with its thundering drays and clanging trams. Murchison had done the work of two men in the surgery that morning, silent, skilful, and determined, a man who worked that the savage smart of sorrow might be soothed and assuaged thereby. With the women and the children he was very gentle and very patient. His hands were never rough and never clumsy. Perhaps none of the people whose wounds he dressed guessed how bitter a wound was bleeding in the heart of this sad-eyed, patient-faced man.

John Tugler sidled in when Murchison had pinned up the last bandage. He swung the door to gently, sighed, and pretended to examine the entries in the ledger. Murchison was washing his hands at the sink, staring hard at the water as it splashed from the tap upon his fingers.

"Not much visiting to-day."

"No."

"I'll hire a cab, and drive down to Black End. Most of them seem to lie that way."

Murchison was looking for a clean place in the roller-towel.

"I can manage the visiting down there," he said.

John Tugler surveyed him attentively over a fat shoulder.

"You'll knock up, old man," he remarked, quietly.

Murchison started. The familiarity had a touch of tenderness that lifted it from its vulgar setting.

"Thanks, no."

"Very bad, is she?"

"Comatose."

"Oh, damn!"

The little man whipped over the leaves of the ledger, as though looking for something that he could not find.

"It seems a beastly shame," he said, presently.

"Shame?"

"Yes, this sort of smash-up of a youngster's life. They call it Providence, or the Divine Will, or something of that sort, don't they? Must say I can't stick that sort of bosh."

Murchison was wringing his hands fiercely in the folds of the rough towel.

"It is a natural judgment, I suppose," he said.

"A judgment?"

"It was my fault that the child ever came here. It need not have been so—" and he broke off with a savage twisting of the mouth.

John Tugler ran one finger slowly across a blank space in the ledger.

"Don't take it that way," he said, slowly; "it doesn't help a man to curse himself because a damned bug of a bacillus breeds in this holy horror of a town. Curse the British Constitution, the law-mongers, or the local money shufflers who'd rather save three farthings than clean their slums."

James Murchison was silent. Yet in his heart there burned the fierce conviction that the father's frailty had been visited upon the innocent body of the child.

Four o'clock had struck, and the houses were casting long shadows across the waters of the canal, before Murchison turned in at the gate of Clovelly after three hours visiting in the Wilton slums. He let himself in silently with his latch-key, hung his hat and coat in the hall, and entered the little front room where tea was laid on the imitation walnut table. On the sofa by the window he found Catherine asleep, her head resting against the wall. It was as though sheer weariness, the spell of many sleepless nights, had fallen on her, and that but a momentary slacking of her self-control had suffered nature to assert her sway.

Murchison stood looking at his wife in silence. Sleep had wiped out much of the sorrow from her face, and she seemed beautiful as Beatrice dreaming strange dreams upon the walls of heaven. A stray strand of March sunlight had woven itself into her hair. Her hands lay open beside her on the sofa, open, palms upward, with a quaint suggestion of trustfulness and appeal. To Murchison it seemed that if God but saw her thus, such prayers as she had uttered would be answered out of pity for the brave sweetness of her womanhood.

If peace lingered in sleep, there would be sorrow in her waking. Murchison was loath to recall her to the world of coarse reality and unpitying truth. A great tenderness, a strong man's tenderness for a woman and a wife, softened his face as he watched the quiet drawing of her breath. And yet what ultimate kindness could there be in such delay? Life and death are but the counterparts of day and night.

Catherine awoke with a touch of her husband's hand upon her cheek. She sighed, put out her arms to him, a consciousness of pain vivid at once upon her face.

"You here!"

She put her hands up to her forehead.

"I never meant to sleep. What a long day you must have had!"

"It is better that I should work."

"Yes."

"How is she?"

"The same; I can see no change."

Catherine rose with a suggestion of effort, and leaned for a moment on her husband's arm. The impulse seemed simultaneous with them, the impulse that drew them to the room above. They went up together, hand in hand, silent and restrained, two souls awed by the mysteries of death and life.

On the bed by the window lay Gwen, with childishly open yet sightless eyes. A flush of vivid color showed on either cheek, her golden hair falling aside like waves of light about her forehead. Her breathing was tranquil and feeble, and spaced out with a peculiar rhythm. The pupils of the eyes were markedly unequal; one lid drooped slightly, and the right angle of the red mouth was a little drawn.

It is a certain pitiful semblance of health that mocks the heart in many such cases. Children who die thus are often beautiful. They seem to sleep with open eyes. The flush on the cheeks has nothing of the gathering grayness of death.

Catherine, bending low, looked at Gwen with the long look of one who will not see the vanishing torch of hope.

"She is still asleep."

"Yes, asleep."

The man's voice was a tearless echo.

"James, it can't be. Look, what a color! And the eyes—"

Murchison laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"I know; I have seen such things before."

"But she will wake presently?"

"Presently."

"Yes. This long sleep will do her good."

Murchison sighed.

"She will not wake for us, wife," he said.

"Not wake!"

Catherine's eyes were incredulous, full of the intenseness of a mother's love.

"No, not here."

"But look—look at her!"

"That is the pity of it."

"Then I shall not hear her speak again; she will never see me?"

"Never."

"But why? I cannot believe—"

"Dear, it is death—the way some children die."

They stood silent, side by side. Then Catherine bent low; child's mouth and mother's mouth met in a long dream kiss. There was a sound of broken, troubled whispering in the room, a sound as of inarticulate tenderness and wordless prayer. Murchison's right hand covered his face. His wife's

eyes and cheeks were wet with tears.

"Kate."

She bowed herself over the child, and did not stir.

"No, no, these last hours, they are so precious."

He looked at her mutely, put a hand to his throat, and turned away. It was too solemn, too poignant a scene for him to outrage it with words. Gwen, dead in life, would see her mother's face no more.

Murchison was on the stairs when the blare of a tin trumpet seemed to hurt the silence of the little house. An impatient fist was beating a tattoo on the front door. It was the boy Jack come home from school.

Murchison's mouth quivered, and then hardened. He went to the door, and opened it to a blast of the boy's trumpet.

"Hallo, I say—"

A strong hand twisted the toy from the boy's fingers.

"Silence."

Jack Murchison's mouth gaped. He looked at his father's face, wonderingly, grievedly, and was awed into a frightened silence, child egoist that he was, by the expression in his father's eyes.

Murchison pointed to the sitting-room door.

"Go and sit down."

The boy obeyed, sullen and a little stupefied. His father closed and locked the door on him, and then passed out into the space behind the house that they called a garden. A few crocuses were gilding the sour, black earth. They were flowers that Gwen had planted before Christmas-time. And Murchison, as he looked at them, thought that she should take them in her little hands to the Great Father of all Children.

CHAPTER XXVII

Miss Carmagee sat crying at the breakfast-table over a letter that she held in her fat, white hand. It was a letter from Catherine, and told of the last resting-place of Gwen, a narrow bed of clay amid white headstones on the Wilson hills. She had been reading the letter aloud to her brother, whose face was a study in the irritable suppression of his feelings.

"Damn that bird!"

The canary in its cage by the window was filling the room with shivers of shrill sound. Porteus pushed his chair back, jerked an antimacassar from the sofa, and flung it over the bird's cage.

"Go on, dear, go on. I am expecting Dixon to see me in ten minutes."

Miss Carmagee wiped her spectacles, and blundered on brokenly through the letter. There were eight pages, closely written, and whether it was the indistinctness of Catherine's writing, or the dimness of Miss Carmagee's eyes, the old lady's progress was sluggish in the extreme. She had forgotten to add milk to her untasted cup of tea, and the rashers of bacon on her plate were congealing into unappetizing grease.

Porteus sat fidgeting at the far end of the table. The vitality of his interest betrayed itself in a frowning and jerky spirit of impatience.

"Well, what are they going to do now, eh? Stay on and lose the boy? Murchison ought to have more sense."

Miss Carmagee's eyes had assumed an expression of moist surprise behind her spectacles. She appeared to be digesting some unexpected piece of news in silence, and with the amiable forgetfulness of a lethargic mind.

Porteus had handed her his empty cup. Some seconds elapsed before his sister noticed the intrusion of the china.

"Dear, what a coincidence!"

She took the cup and filled it mechanically, her eyes still fixed upon the letter.

"Well, what is it?"

"If only it had happened earlier, the money would have been of use."

Mr. Porteus betrayed the natural impatience of the energetic male.

"Bless my soul, are you contriving a monopoly?"

Miss Carmagee lifted her mild spectacles to her brother's face.

"Mrs. Pentherby is dead," she said.

"Dead!"

"Yes."

"No extreme loss to the community. Ah—would you—!" and he cast a threatening glance in the direction of the bird-cage at the sound of an insinuating "tweet." "Well, what about the money?"

The lawyer's eyes twinkled as though Mrs. Pentherby's dividends were more interesting than her person.

"She has left nearly all her money and her furniture to Catherine. She died the very same day as Gwen."

"Pity it wasn't six months ago. The old lady had some first-class china, and a few fine pictures. Does Catherine say how much?"

"How much what, Porteus?"

"Money, my dear, money."

"I don't think she says."

Her brother pushed back his chair, and glanced briskly at his watch.

"I'll take it with me," he said, stretching out a brown and energetic hand for the letter.

"I haven't quite finished it, Porteus."

“Never mind; there’s your breakfast getting cold. You had better have some fresh tea made.”

His sister surrendered the letter with a spirit of amiable self-negation.

“The money ought to make a difference to them,” she said, softly, taking off her spectacles and wiping them with slow, pensive hands.

“Money always makes a difference, my dear, especially when people are heroically proud.”

Miss Phyllis Carmagee’s thoughts were towards that gray-skied, slaving, sordid town where Gwen was buried, as she sipped her tea and looked at her brother’s empty chair. She was a woman whom many of her neighbors thought stolid and reserved, a woman not gifted with great powers of self-expression. Friendship with many is a mere gratification of the social ego. The vivacious people who delight in conversationalism, take pleasure in those personalities that are new and pleasing for the moment, even as they are interested in new and complex flowers. To Phyllis Carmagee, however, her friends had more of the enduring dearness of familiar trees. They were part of her consciousness, part of her daily and her yearly life.

Porteus’s sister came by an idea as she sat alone at the breakfast-table that morning. Serene and obese natures are slow in conceiving, yet the concept may have the greater stability for the very slowness of the progress. The crystallization of that idea went on all day, till it was ready to be displayed in its completeness to her brother as he dined. Miss Carmagee had decided to go down to Wilton, and to show that her friendship was worth a long day’s journey. A sentimental and unctuous letter would have sufficed for a mere worldling. But Porteus Carmagee’s sister had that rare habit of being loyal and sincere.

“I should like to see the child’s grave,” she said, quietly, her round, white face very soft and gentle in the light of the shaded lamp; “it seems hard to realize that the little thing is dead. Gwen meant so much to her father. I wonder what they are going to do.”

Porteus Carmagee stared hard at the silver epergne full of daffodils before him on the table. They were at dessert, and alone, with the curtains drawn, and a wood fire burning in the old-fashioned grate. The whole setting of the room spoke of a generation that was past. It suggested solidity and repose, placid kindliness, prosaic comfort.

“Murchison ought never to have left us,” said the lawyer, curtly.

“No.”

“The affair might have blown over in a year.”

“You think so, Porteus.”

“If he had only stuck to his guns. People always wait to see what a man will do. If he skedaddles they draw their own inferences. Life is largely a game of bluff.”

The eyes of brother and sister met in a sudden questioning glance. Possibly the same thought had occurred to both.

“Would it be possible?”

“Possible for what?”

“For James Murchison to come back to Roxton?”

The lawyer reached for his napkin that had slipped down from his knees.

“That is the question,” he confessed, “it is not easy to rebuild a reputation. I would rather face fire than the sneers of my genteel neighbors.”

Miss Carmagee’s placid face had lost its habitual air of contentment and repose.

“I know it would require courage,” she said.

“People would probably call it impertinence. It requires more than courage to be successfully impertinent in this world.”

“Cleverness, Porteus?”

“Genius, the genius of patience, magnanimity, and self-restraint.”

His sister pondered a moment, while Porteus sipped his port.

“Then—there is Catherine?”

Her brother’s keen eyes lit up at the name.

“Ah, there we have a touch of the divine fire.”

“She could help him.”

“Next to God.”

There was silence again between them for a season. The dim and homely room seemed full of a quiet dignity, a pervading restfulness that was clean and good. The most prosaic people grow great and lovable when their hearts are moved to succor others. The words of a beggar may strike the noblest chords of time, and live with the utterances of martyrs and of prophets.

“Porteus.”

Brother and sister looked at each other.

“I might speak to them.”

“Perhaps, dear, better than any one.”

“And if they need money? Mrs. Pentherby’s property cannot come to them at once. The law—”

Porteus’s face twinkled benignantly.

“The law, like a mule, is abominably slow. If I can be of any use to them—remind Kate that I am still alive.”

Miss Carmagee regarded her brother affectionately across the table.

“Then I shall go to-morrow,” she said, with a quiet sigh.

CHAPTER XXVIII

An increased sallowness and a slight thinning of the hair were the only changes that might have been noticed in Parker Steel that spring. The characteristic symptoms had been slight and evanescent, the “rash” so faint and transient that a delicate dusting of powder had hidden it even

from Mrs. Betty's eyes. A few of his most intimate friends had noticed that Parker Steel had the tense, strained look of a man suffering from overwork. That he had given up his nightly cigar and his wine, pointed also to the fact that the physician had knowledge of his own needs.

To such a man as Steel the zest of life lay in the energetic stir and ostentatious bustle of success. His conceit was in his cleverness, in the smartness of his equipage and reputation, and in the flattering gossip that haunts a healer's name. Parker Steel was essentially a selfish mortal, and selfish men are often the happiest, provided they succeed.

Yet no man, however selfish, can wholly stifle his own thoughts. That the silence he kept was an immoral silence, no man knew better than did Parker Steel. People would have shrunk from him had they known the truth, as a refined woman shrinks from the offensive carcass of a drunken tramp. His own niceness of taste revolted from the consciousness of chance and undeserved pollution. Ambition was strong in him, however, and the cold tenacity to hold what he had gained. More isolated than Selkirk on his island, he had to bear the bitterness of it alone, knowing that sympathy was locked out by silence.

The supreme trying of his powers of hypocrisy came for him in his attitude towards his wife. Parker Steel was in no sense an uxorious fellow, and neither he nor Betty were ever demonstrative towards each other. An occasional half-perfunctory meeting of the lips had satisfied both after the first year of marriage. For this reason Parker Steel's ordeal was less complex and severe than if he had had to repulse an emotional and warm-blooded woman.

The first diplomatic development had been insomnia; at least that was the excuse he made to Betty when he chose to sleep alone in his dressing-room at the back of the house. The faintest sound disturbed him, so he protested, and the rattle of wheels over the cobbles of the Square kept him irritably sleepless in the early hours of the morning. To Betty Steel there was no inconsistency in the excuse he gave. She thought him worried and overworked, and there was abundant justification for the latter evil. Winter and early spring are the briskest seasons of a doctor's life. Dr. Steel had had seven severe cases of pneumonia on his list one week.

"You are too much in demand, Parker," she had said. "There is always the possibility of a partner to be considered."

"Thanks, no; I am not a believer in a co-operative business."

"You must take a jaunt somewhere as soon as the work slackens."

"All in good time, dear."

"Sicily is fashionable."

Parker Steel had indulged in optimistic reflections to distract her vigilance. She had sought to prove that he was in stale health by remarking that the wound on his forefinger had not completely healed. He was still wearing the finger-stall that covered the *fons et origo mali*.

"There is absolutely no need for you to fuss about me," he had answered; "I am not made of iron, and the work tells. Three thousand a year is not earned without worry."

"As much as that, Parker?"

He had touched a susceptible passion in her.

"Perhaps more. We shall be able to call our own tune before we are five-and-forty."

"Heaven defend us, Parker, you hint at terrible things. Respectable obesity, and morning prayers."

Her husband had laughed, and given her plausible comfort.

"You will be more dangerous then than you are now," he had said.

In truth, their fortunes were very much in the ascendant, and the social side of professional life had prospered in Mrs. Betty's hands. The brunette was supreme in Roxton so far as beauty was concerned, supreme also in the yet more magic elements of graceful *savoir-faire* and tact. She was one of those women who had learned to charm by flattery without seeming to be a sycophant; moreover, she had tested the wisdom of propitiating her own sex by appearing even more amiable to women than to men. Since the passing of the Murchisons she had had nothing in the way of rivalry to fear. True, two "miserable squatters" had put up brass plates in the town, and scrambled for some of the poorer of James Murchison's patients. Mrs. Betty had been able to call upon the wives with patronizing magnanimity. They were both rather dusty, round-backed ladies, with no pretensions to style, either in their own persons or in the persons of their husbands. One of these professional gentlemen, a huge and flat-faced Paddy, resembled a police constable in plain clothes. The other was rather a meek young man in glasses, destitute of any sense of humor, and very useful in the Sunday-school.

Roxton had weathered Lent and Easter, and Lady Sophia Gillingham, Dame President of the local habitation of the Primrose League; patroness of all Roxton charities, Dissenting enterprises excepted; and late lady-in-waiting to the Queen; had called her many dear friends together to discuss the coming Midsummer Bazaar that was held annually for the benefit of the Roxton Cottage Hospital. Roxton, like the majority of small country towns, was a veritable complexity of cliques, and by "Roxton" should be understood the superior people who were Unionists in politics, and Church Christians in religion. There were also Chapel Christians in Roxton, chiefly of Radical persuasion, and therefore hardly decent in the sight of the genteel. People of "peculiar views" were rare, and not generally encouraged. Some of the orthodox even refused to buy a local tradesman's boots, because that particular tradesman was not a believer in the Trinity. The inference is obvious that the "Roxton" concerned in Lady Sophia's charitable bazaar, was superior and highly cultured Roxton, the Roxton of dinner-jackets and distinction, equipages, and Debrett.

To be a very dear friend of Lady Sophia Gillingham's was to be one of the chosen and elect of God, and Betty Steel had come by that supreme and angelic exaltation. Perhaps Mignon's kitten had purred and gambolled Mrs. Betty into favor; more probably the physician's wife had nothing to learn from any cat. Betty Steel and her husband dined frequently at Roxton Priory. The brunette had even reached the unique felicity of being encouraged in informal and unexpected calls. Lady Sophia possessed a just and proper estimate of her own social position. She was fat, commonplace,

and amiable, poorly educated, a woman of few ideas. But she was Lady Sophia Gillingham, and would have expected St. Peter to give her proper precedence over mere commoners in the anteroom of heaven.

The third Thursday after Easter Mrs. Betty Steel drove homeward in a radiant mood, with the spirit of spring stolen from the dull glint of a fat old lady's eyes. There had been an opening committee meeting, and Lady Sophia had expressed it to be her wish that Mrs. Steel should be elected secretary. Moreover, the production of a play had been discussed, a pink muslin drama suited to the susceptibilities of the Anglican public. The part of heroine had been offered, not unanimously, to Mrs. Betty. And with a becoming spirit of diffidence she had accepted the honor, when pressed most graciously by the Lady Sophia's own prosings.

Mrs. Betty might have impersonated April as she swept homeward under the high beneficence of St. Antonia's elms. The warmth of worldly well-being plumps out a woman's comeliness. She expands and ripens in the sun of prosperity and praise, in contrast to the thousands of the ever-contriving poor, whose sordid faces are but the reflection of sordid facts.

Betty Steel's face had an April alluringness that day; its outlines were soft and beautiful, suggestive of the delicacy of apple bloom seen through morning mist. She was exceeding well content with life, was Mrs. Betty, for her husband was in a position to write generous checks, and the people of Roxton seemed ready to pay her homage.

Parker Steel was reading in the dining-room when this triumphant and happy lady came in like a white flower rising from a sheath of green. It was only when selfishly elated that the wife showed any flow of affection for her husband. For the once she had the air of an enthusiastic girl whom marriage had not robbed of her ideals.

"Dear old Parker—"

She went towards him with an out-stretching of the hands, as he dropped the *Morning Post*, and half rose from the lounge chair.

"Had a good time?"

"Quite splendid."

She swooped towards him, not noticing the furtive yet watchful expression in her husband's face.

"Give me a kiss, old *Morning Post*."

"How is Madam Sophia?"

"Most affable."

Parker Steel had caught her out-stretched hands. It was as though he were afraid of touching his wife's lips.

"Making conquests, eh?"

"Waal—I guess that"—and she spoke through her nose.

"Dollars?"

"Enticing them into the family pocket."

Something in her husband's eyes touched Betty Steel beneath her vivacity and easy persiflage. Her husband had risen from his chair, released her hands, and moved away towards the fire. She had a sudden instinct telling her that he was not glad of her return.

The wife's airiness was damped instantly. Parker Steel had repelled her with the semi-playful air of a man not wishing to be bothered. She had noticed this suggestion of aloofness much in him of late, and had ascribed it to irritability, the result of overwork.

"Anything the matter, dear?"

"Matter?"

He looked at her frankly, with arched brows and open eyes.

"Yes, you seem tired—"

"There is some excuse for me. This is the first ten minutes I have had to myself—all day. It is an effort to talk when one's tongue has been going for hours."

His wife's face appeared a little *triste* and peevish. She glanced at herself in the mirror over the mantel-piece, and found herself wondering why life seemed composed of actions and reactions.

"Have you had tea?"

"No, I waited," and he turned and rang the bell with a feeling of relief. It was trying to his watchfulness for Parker Steel to be left alone with his own wife. Even the white cap of the parlor-maid was welcome to him, or the flimsiest barrier that could aid him in his ordeal of silent self-isolation. The art of hypocrisy grows more complex with each new statement of relationships. And hypocrisy in the home is the reguilding of a substance that tarnishes with every day. The wear and tear of life erase the lying surface, and the daily daubing becomes a habit by necessity, even as a single dying of the hair pledges the vain mortal to perpetual self-decoration.

CHAPTER XXIX

There were many men in Wilton who had looked at their children's graves, little banks of green turf ranged on the hill-side where the winds wailed in winter like the mythical spirits of the damned. A gaunt, graceless place, this cemetery, a place where the insignificant dead lived only in the few notches of a mason's chisel upon stone. A high yellow brick wall encompassed its many acres. Immediately within the iron gates stood a tin chapel, a building that might have stood for the Temple of Ugliness, the deity of commercialized towns. On either side of the main walk a row of sickly aspens lifted their slender branches against a hueless sky.

To the man and the woman who stood in one corner of this burial-ground, looking down upon a grave that had been but lately banked with turf, there was an infinite and sordid sadness in the scene. Two graves, not ten yards away, had been filled in but the day before, and the grass was caked and stained with yellow clay. Near them stood the black wooden shelter used by the

officiating priest in dirty weather. A few wreaths, sodden, rain-drenched, the flowers already turning brown, seemed to mock the hands that had placed them there.

White headstones everywhere; a few obelisks; a few plain wooden crosses; rank mounds where no name lingered after death. Ever and again the thin clink of the hopeless chapel bell. A gray sky merging into a wet, gray landscape. In the valley—Wilton, prostrate under mist and smoke.

James Murchison, standing bareheaded before Gwen's grave, gazed at the wet turf with the eyes of a man who saw more beneath it than mere lifeless clay. There was nothing of rebellion in the pose of the tall figure—rather, the slight stoop of one poring over some rare book with the reverence of him who reads to learn.

For Catherine there was no consciousness of penance as she stood beside him, silent and distant-eyed. Her hands were clasped together under her cloak. She stood as one waiting, heart heavy, yet ready to awake to the new life that opens even for those who grieve.

There were not a few such groups scattered about this upland burial-ground, colorless, subdued figures seen dimly through the drizzling mist of rain. Quite near to Murchison a working-man was arranging a few flowers in a large white jam-pot; the grave, by the name on the headstone, was the grave of his wife. A few children, who had wandered up to see some funeral, were playing "touch wood" between the aspens of the main walk. There was an irresponsible callousness in their shrill, slum-hardened voices. To them this place of Death was but a field to play in.

Murchison had turned from Gwen's grave, and was looking at his wife. There seemed some bond more sacred between them now that they had shared both life and death in the body of their child.

"You are cold, dear."

He touched her cheek with his hand as he turned up the collar of her cloak. Her hair was wet and a-glisten with the rain, her face cold like the face of one fresh from the breath of an autumn sea.

"Only my skin."

"The wind is keen, though. It is time we turned back home."

"Yes."

"Good-bye, my child."

He spoke the words in a whisper as they moved away from the corner.

Before them, seen dimly through a haze of rain, lay the colliery town, a vague splash of darkness in the valley. Here and there a tall chimney stood trailing smoke, or the faint glow of a fire gave a thin opalescence to the shell of mist. Sounds, faint and far, yet full of the significance of labor, drifted up the bleak slopes of the hillside, like the sounds from ships sailing a foggy sea. The rattle of a train, the shriek of a steam-whistle, the slow strokes of some great clock striking the hour.

James Murchison's eyes were fixed upon this town beside the pit mouths, this pool of poverty and toil, where the eddies of effort never ceased upon the surface. It was strange to him, this colliery town, and yet familiar. Always would his manhood yearn towards it because of the dear dead, even though its memories were hateful to him, full of the bitterness of ignominy and pain.

Gwen's death had come to Murchison as a sudden silence, a strange void in the hurrying entities of life. It was as though the passing of this child had changed the phenomena of existence for him, and given a new rhythm to the pulse of Time. He had become aware of a new setting to life, even as a man who has walked the same road day by day discovers on some winter dawn a fresh and unearthly beauty in the scene. He felt an unsolved newness in his being, a solemnity such as those who have looked upon the dead must feel. And no strong nature can pass through such a phase without creating inward energy and power. Sorrow, like winter, may be but a season of repose, troubled and drear perhaps, but moving towards the miracle of spring.

Wilton cemetery, with its zinc-roofed chapel, its yellow walls and iron gates, lay behind them, while the dim horizon ran in a gray blur along the hills. Husband and wife walked for a time in silence, for each had a burden of deep thought to bear.

It was the man who spoke first, quietly, and with restraint, and yet with something of the fierce spirit of an outcast Cain visible upon his face.

"I have been thinking of what I said to you last night."

She was looking at him with a brave clearness of the eyes.

"I suppose sensible people would call such a venture—mad."

"We are often strongest, dear, when we are most mad."

He swung on beside her, his eyes at gaze.

"The madness of a forlorn hope. No, it is not that. I have not any of the impudence of the adventurer. It is something more solemn, more grim, more for a final end."

"Beloved, I understand."

"Are you not afraid for me?"

"No, no."

She put her hand under his arm.

"God give us both courage, dear," she said.

They had reached the outskirts of Wilton, and the ugliness of the place was less visible in these outworks of the town. The streets had something of the quaintness of antiquity about them, for this was a part of the real Wilton, an old English townlet that had been gripped and strangled by the decapod of the pits.

"About your mother's money, Kate."

The rumble of a passing van compelled silence for a moment.

"You must retain the whole control."

"I?"

"Yes."

He heard a woman's unwillingness in her voice.

"It is my wish, dear. I shall need a certain sum to start with, but my life-insurance can be made a security for that."

“James!”

Her face reproached him.

“Are we so little married that what is mine is not yours also?”

“It is because you are my wife, Kate, that I consider these things. Your mother was wise, though her instructions do not flatter me. Legally, I cannot touch a single penny.”

She looked troubled, and a little impatient.

“I shall hate the money—if—no, I don’t mean that. But, dear,” and she drew very close to him in the twilight of the streets, “it will make no difference. You will not feel—?”

“Feel, Kate?”

“That it is mine, and not yours. You know, dear, what I mean. I don’t want to think—to think that you will feel as though you had to ask.”

They looked, man and wife, into each other’s eyes.

“I shall ask, Kate, because—”

“Because?”

“You are what you are. It will not hurt me to remember that the stuff is yours.”

Now, quite an hour ago a battered and moth-eaten cab had deposited a stout lady on the doorstep of Clovelly. The stout lady had a round white face that beamed sympathetically from under the arch of a rather grotesque bonnet. A girl, hired for the month, and dressed in a makeshift black frock, had opened the door three inches to Miss Carmagee. There had been a confidential discussion between these two, the girl letting the gap between door and door-post increase before the lady in the grotesque bonnet. The doctor and the “missus” were out, and Master Jack having tea at a friend’s house in the next street. So much Miss Carmagee had learned before she had been admitted to the little front room.

It was quite dusk when Catherine and her husband turned in at the garden gate. The blinds were down, the gas lit. Murchison opened the front door with his key, remembering, as he ever remembered, the golden head that would shine no more for him in that diminutive, dreary house.

He was hanging his coat on a peg in the passage, when he heard a sharp cry from Catherine, who had entered the front room. There was the rustling of skirts, the sound of an inarticulate greeting between two eager friends.

No one could have doubted Miss Carmagee’s solid identity. She was resting her hands on Catherine’s shoulders. They had kissed each other like mother and child.

“Why, when did you come? We had no letter. James, James—”

Murchison found them holding hands. There were tears in Miss Carmagee’s mild blue eyes. Warned of her coming, he might have shirked the meeting with the pride of a man too sensitive towards the past. But Miss Carmagee in the flesh, motherly and very gentle, with Catherine’s kisses warm upon her face, stood for nothing that was critical, or chilling to the heart.

He met her with open hands.

“You have taken us by surprise.”

Miss Phyllis’s eyes were on the sad, memory-shadowed face.

“I had to come,” and her voice failed her a little. “I sha’n’t worry you; we are old friends.”

She put up her benign and ugly face, as though the privilege of a mother belonged to her by nature.

“I have felt it all so much.”

A flash of infinite yearning leaped up and passed in the man’s eyes.

“You must be tired,” he said, clinging to commonplaces. “Have they sent your luggage up?”

Miss Carmagee sank into a chair.

“I left it at the hotel. I’m not going to be a worry.”

“Worry!”

“Of course not, child.”

“Oh—but we must have you here. James—”

“My dear,” and the substantial nature of the old lady’s person seemed to become evident, “I insist on sleeping there to-night. Now, humor me, or I shall feel myself a nuisance.”

Miss Carmagee’s solidity of will made her contention impregnable. Moreover, the common-sense view she took of the matter boasted a large element of discretion. People who live in a small house on one hundred and sixty pounds a year cannot be expected to be prepared for social emergencies. Even a philosopher is limited by the contents of his larder, and Miss Carmagee was one of those excellent women whose philosophy takes note of the trivial things of life—pots, pans, and linen, the cold end of mutton, a rice-pudding to supply three. It is truly regrettable that a man’s Promethean spirit should be bound down by such contemptible trifles. Yet a tactful refusal to share a suet-pudding may be worth more than the wittiest epigram ever made.

Miss Carmagee and Catherine spent an hour alone together that evening, for Murchison had patients waiting for him at Dr. Tugler’s surgery in Wilton High Street. Master Jack had returned from his tea-party, to be hugged, presented with a box of soldiers, a clasp-knife, and a prayer-book, and then hurried off to bed. The soldiers and the knife shared the sheets with him; the prayer-book (amiable aunts forgive!) was left derelict under an arm-chair.

But the great event that night for these two women, such contrasts and yet so alike in the deeper things of the soul, came with that communing together before the fire, the lights turned low, the room in shadow. It was somewhile before Miss Carmagee approached the purpose that had brought her across England with bag and baggage. She was a woman of tact, and it is not easy to be a partisan at times without wounding those whom we wish to help.

The elder woman had hardly broached the subject, before Catherine, sitting on a cushion beside Miss Carmagee’s chair, turned from the fire-light with an eager lifting of the head.

“Why, it was only yesterday that James spoke to me of such a plan.”

“To return to us?”

“Yes, and win back what he lost.”

Miss Carmagee saw her way more clearly.

"You know, child, you have many friends."

"I?"

"Yes, and your husband also. Porteus and I discussed the matter. You must not think us busybodies, dear."

A kiss was the surest answer.

"I was afraid when James first spoke of it."

"Afraid?"

"Yes," and she colored; "it was cowardly of me, but I remembered how we left the place. It will be an ordeal. We shall have to walk through fire together. But still—"

"Well, child," and Miss Carmagee let her have her say.

"Still, there is a greatness in the plan that takes my heart. We women love our husbands to be brave. I know what it will mean to James. He says that many people will think him mad."

Miss Carmagee sat stroking one of Catherine's hands.

"It is the right kind of madness," she said, softly.

"To rise above public opinion?"

"Yes, when we are in the right."

They sat for a while in silence, looking into the fire, Catherine's head against Miss Carmagee's shoulder. Above, in the nursery, Jack Murchison was trying his new knife on the rail of a bedroom chair. He had crept out of bed, rummaged up some matches, and lit the gas. The boy had no eyes for the empty cot in the far corner of the room. He had not yet grasped what the loss of a life in the home meant.

"I want you to promise me something, dear."

Miss Carmagee's hand touched the mother's hair.

"Yes?"

"I want you to tell me frankly—about the money."

Catherine looked up into the benign, white face.

"You mean—?"

"I mean, dear, that there is a lot of dusting and polishing to be done before the lawyers allow people to step into their own shoes. I have a pair that I could lend you for a year or so."

Catherine smiled at the simile, despite the occasion. Miss Carmagee's shoes were as large and generous as her heart.

"It is too good of you. They tell me I have inherited property that will bring in an income of seven to eight hundred a year. I don't think—"

"Well?"

"That we could let you be so generous."

Miss Carmagee leaned forward in her chair.

"Generous? It is not generous, dear; a mere matter of convenience."

"You call it merely 'convenience'?"

"No, child, I ought to call it a blessing to me, a true blessing. Don't you understand that it would make me very happy?"

"Yes, I understand."

"That's right."

"How good and kind you are."

"Nonsense, dear, nonsense."

CHAPTER XXX

Mr. Gehogan, the gentleman from Ireland who had attempted to possess himself of the scatterings of James Murchison's practice, had discovered no proper spirit of appreciation in Roxton, and as though to register his displeasure, had departed abruptly, so abruptly that he had left behind him many unpaid bills. The house in Lombard Street had held him and his progeny for some seasons, and the family had left its mark upon the place in more instances than one. Miss Carmagee and her brother, who went over the house for some unexplained reason, concluded that clean paint and paper, and many scrubbings with soap and water, were needed for the effacement of an atmosphere of mediæval sanctity. The charwoman averred—an excellent authority—that the late tenant had kept pigs in a shed at the end of the garden, and had salted and stored the bacon in the bath. The house itself had been left littered with all sorts of rubbish. Dr. Gehogan's youngsters had turned the back garden into a species of pleasaunce by the sea. There was a big puddle in the middle of the lawn, and oyster-shells, broken bricks, and jam-jars had accumulated to an extraordinary extent.

About the end of April such people of observation as passed down Lombard Street, discovered that the great red-brick house was preparing for new tenants. Mr. Clayton, the decorator, had hung his professional board from the central first-floor window. Sashes were being repainted white, the front door an æsthetic green. Paper-hangers were at work in the chief rooms, and whitewash brushes splashed and flapped in the kitchen quarters. Questioned by interested fellow-tradesmen as to the name and nature of the incoming tenant, Mr. Clayton blinked and confessed his ignorance. He was working under Mr. Porteus Carmagee's orders. Mr. Clayton had even heard that the house had changed hands, and that the lawyer had bought it from the late owner, but whether it was let, Mr. Clayton could not tell. Even Mr. Beasely, the local house-agent, was no wiser in the matter. Speculation remained possible, while the more pushing of the local tradesmen were ready at any moment to tout for the new-comers' "esteemed patronage."

One afternoon early in May a large furniture van, manœuvring to and fro in Lombard Street and

absorbing the whole road, compelled a stylish carriage and pair to come to a sharp halt. The carriage was Dr. Parker Steel's, and it contained his wife, a complacent study in pink, with a pert little white hat perched on a most elaborate yet seemingly simple coiffure. The footway opposite the Murchison's old house was littered with straw, and stray odds and ends of furniture, while two men in green baize aprons were struggling up the steps with a Chesterfield sofa. Through one of the open windows of the dining-room, Betty Steel's sharp eyes caught sight of Miss Carmagee, rigged up in a white apron and unpacking china with the help of one of her maids.

The furniture van had made port, and Parker Steel's carriage rolled on into St. Antonia's Square. Mrs. Betty's eyes had clouded a little under her Paris hat, for unpleasant thoughts are invariably suggested by the faces of people who do not love us. The ego in self-conscious mortals is sensitive as a piece of smoked-glass. The passing of the faintest shadow is registered upon its surface, and its lustre may be dimmed by a chance breath.

This house in Lombard Street had never lost for Betty Steel its suggestion of passive hostility. Its associations always stirred the energies of an unforgotten hate, and though triumphant, she often found herself frowning when she passed the place. Moreover, Miss Carmagee had been the other woman's friend, and in life there can be no neutrality when rivals fight for survival in the business of success.

Betty Steel had come from the orchards that were white about Roxton Priory, yet the glimpse of the stir and movement in that red-brick house had blown the May-bloom from her thoughts. Did Kate Murchison ever wish herself back in Lombard Street? What had become of her and her children? Betty Steel woke from a moment's reverie as the carriage drew up before her own home.

The elderly parlor-maid, five feet of starch, to say nothing of the cap, opened the front door to Mrs. Betty. There was an inquisitive lift about the woman's eyelids, and Betty Steel, an expert in the deciphering of faces, expected news of some sort or another.

"Any one in the drawing-room, Symons?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well?"

"Dr. Steel is in the study. He wished me to say that he would see you the moment you came home."

Nearly twenty-four hours had passed since Betty Steel had seen her husband. The physician had been called up in the night, and had breakfasted away. She herself had lunched with Lady Gillingham, so that their paths had run uncrossed since yesterday.

"Has any one called?"

"No, ma'am."

"You may bring up tea."

The Venetian blinds were down in the consulting room, an initial coincidence, for Parker Steel was a believer in light. He was sitting at the bureau by the window, but glanced over his shoulder as his wife entered.

"Is that you, dear?"

"Yes; what is it?"

She was playing with her silk scarf, and looking with rather a puzzled air at her husband.

"I've just sent off a wire to town."

"A wire?"

"Yes, to Turner, for a first-class locum. The man will be here early to-morrow. Shut the door, dear—shut the door."

There was an irritable harshness of voice and a jerkiness of manner that betrayed unusual lack of self-control. Her husband's back was half turned to her, and he was scribbling on a sheet of paper that he had before him, but she could see the frown upon his forehead and the nervous working of his lips.

"What is the matter, Parker?"

"Oh, nothing serious, only one of your prophecies come home to roost."

"My prophecies?"

"Yes, about overwork. I was a fool not to knock off earlier. Some inflammatory trouble in my eyes."

"Eyes?"

She echoed the word, showing for the first time some stirrings of alarm.

"What is it?"

"Strain, nothing more. It came on quite suddenly. I shall have to have a month's absolute rest."

He leaned back, and put a hand up to his forehead.

"Let me look."

Betty went to him, and leaned her hands upon the side rail of his chair.

"You won't make much of them. See, I'm just writing out a few hints and directions.

"They look inflamed, Parker."

He shrugged impatiently.

"Don't bother about the eyes. See, I want you to give these notes to Turner's locum when he comes. The list is complete, with a cross against the more important people. The work's lighter again; he can manage it alone."

"Yes," but she still looked troubled.

"I shall get away by the 10.15 to-morrow morning."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh—to Torquay. I've wired to a hotel. Ramsden is doing eye-work down there, you know. He will soon put me right."

Betty stood with her hands resting on the back of his chair. His assurances had not wholly satisfied her. She had a vague feeling that he was keeping something back.

"Parker."

“Yes, dear.”

He appeared busy dashing down professional hieroglyphics on the paper before him.

“You are not keeping anything from me?”

“Anything from you!”

“Yes. It is nothing dangerous?”

“My dear girl, I ought to know!”

She sighed, looked at the darkened window, and then stooping suddenly, kissed him softly on the cheek.

“Parker—”

He had reddened and drawn aside, with an irritable knitting of the brows.

“Leave me alone, dear, for a while. I want to put the practice in order.”

Repulsed, she removed her hands from the chair.

“I was only anxious—”

“Don’t worry; there’s no cause. You will stay here and look after things for me?”

“Yes. I can have Madge to stay.”

“And, Betty—”

“Yes.”

“Don’t say much about the eyes. It doesn’t do for a professional man to get a reputation for feebleness in his physical equipment.”

“I shall not say anything.”

“Thanks. You see, I’m rather busy.”

She turned, looked round the room vaguely, her face cold and empty of any marked expression. Then she went slowly to the door, opened it, and passed out into the hall. The house seemed peculiarly dim and lonely as she climbed the stairs to her own room.

CHAPTER XXXI

“Good-bye, Mrs. Murchison; good-bye, old man; wish you could have stayed with us. Shake hands, sonny, now you’re off.”

A barrow-load of belated luggage went clattering by as the shrill pipe of the guard’s whistle sounded the departure. On the opposite platform a couple of porters were banging empty milk-cans on to a truck. Yet from the noise and turmoil of it all, John Tugler’s red face shone out with a redeeming exuberance of good-will.

“Good-bye.”

Murchison was leaning from the window, and the two men shook hands.

“Good luck to you.”

“Thanks. You have been very good to us. We shall not forget it.”

“Bosh, man, bosh!” and John Tugler gave Catherine a final flourish of his hat.

The train was on the move, but Murchison still leaned from the window, to the exclusion of his excited and irrepressible son. We grow fond of people who have stood by us in trouble, and John Tugler, bumptious and money-making mortal that he was, carried many generous impulses under his gorgeous waistcoat. The gift of sympathy covers a multitude of imperfections, for the heart craves bread and wine from others, and not the philosopher’s stone.

Interminable barriers of brick, back yards, sour, rubbish-ridden gardens were gliding by. Factories with their tall chimneys, the minarets of labor, stood out above the crowded grayness of the monotonous streets. Hardly a tree, and not an acre of green grass, in Wilton. It was as though nature had cursed the place, and left it no symbol of the season, no passing pageantry of summer, autumn, or of spring.

Catherine had kept Jack by her side, and the boy was kneeling on the seat and looking out of the window. She felt that her husband was in no mood for the child’s chattering. In leaving Wilton he was leaving a poignant part of reality behind, to enter upon a life that should try the strength of his manhood as a bowman tries a bow.

An old lady and a consumptive clerk were their only fellow-travellers. Murchison had chosen a corner whose window looked towards the west, and an intense and determined face it was that stared out over the ugliness of Wilton town. Houses had given place to market-gardens, acres of cabbages, flat, dismal, and dotted with zinc-roofed sheds. Beyond came the slow, sad heave of the Wilton hills, and, seen dimly—white specks upon the hill-side—the crowded head-stones where the dead slept.

The eyes of husband and wife met for a moment. They smiled at each other with the wistful cheerfulness of two people who have determined to be brave, a pathetic pretence hardly created to deceive. Moroseness need not testify deep feeling. The gleam from between the clouds turns even the wet clouds to gold.

Jack Murchison was watching a couple of colts cantering across a field beside the line.

“Mother, look at the old horses.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Silly old things. They’re making that old cow run. The brown one’s like Wellington, the horse we had before dad bought the car.”

“So it is, dear.”

“P’r’aps it is Wellington?”

“No, dear, Wellington must be dead by now.”

The old lady in the opposing corner was looking at Jack over her spectacles, and the boy took to returning the stare with the inimitable composure of youth. Catherine had turned again towards the other window, but the white head-stones no longer checkered the hill-side. Instead, she saw her

husband's profile, stern and determined, yet infinitely sad.

Life has been described as a series of sensations; and though some days are dull and passionless, others vibrate with a thousand waves of feeling. To Murchison the day had been crowded with sensation since the break of dawn. It was a day of disruption, a plucking up of routine from the soil, a change of attitude that concerned the soul even more than the body. He yearned towards Wilton, and yet fled from it with gratitude; his old home called to him, and yet he dreaded it as a disgraced man might fear the shocked faces of familiar friends. It was a day of unrest, self-judgment, and great forethought for him. The physical atoms seemed to tremble and vibrate, till the manhood in him might have been likened to a tremulous vapor. He could eat nothing, fix his mind on nothing. Even the sagging wires, coming and going as the train swept from pole to pole, were not unsymbolical of his thoughts.

Two hundred miles, with an hour's wait in London, and the monotonous Midlands gave place to the more mysterious and dreamy south. Pine-crowned hills, great oaks and beeches purpling the villages, the blue distance of a more magical horizon. In orchards and meadows the infinite glamour of a golden spring. Quiet rivers curling through the mists of green. In many a park the stately spruce built sombre, windless thickets; larches glimmered with Scotch firs red-throated towards the west. Trees in whispering and triumphant multitudes. Quiet, dreamy meadows where the willows waved. Mysterious Isles of Avalon imaginable towards the setting sun.

Murchison, leaning back in his corner, watched for the pine woods about Roxton town with a deep commingling of yearning and of dread. It was to be a home-coming, and yet what a home-coming! The return of a prodigal, but no cringing prodigal; the return of a man, stiff-necked and square-jawed, ready to fight but not to conciliate. There was something of the tense expectancy of the hour before the bugles blow the assault. Every nerve in Murchison's body tingled.

The boy Jack was jumping from foot to foot at the other window.

"Look, mother, look, there's old Mr. Tomkin's farm! And there's the river. Look—and the kingcups are out! Gwen used to call 'em—"

He stopped suddenly, for his mother had drawn him to her and smothered the words with her mouth.

"You take care of the rugs and umbrellas, dear."

"Yes. Shall I get 'em down?"

"In a minute. Sit still, dear, and don't worry."

She looked across quickly at her husband. Their eyes met. He was pale, but he smiled at her.

"Here we are, at last."

"At last."

Both felt that the ordeal had begun.

They let the boy lean out of the open window as the train ran in and slowed up beside the platform. Porteus Carmagee and his sister were waiting by the door of the booking-office. Jack sighted them and waved a salute, their coach running far beyond the office, for they were in the forepart of the train.

Murchison was the first out of the carriage. He lifted the boy down, and stood waiting to help his wife with some of her parcels.

"Luggage, sir?"

Murchison turned, and stared straight into the face of one of his old patients. The man looked at him blankly for a moment before recognition dawned upon his face.

"Good-day, doctor. Didn't know you, sir, at first," and he touched his cap.

Murchison's upper lip was stiff. He looked like one who had come to judge rather than to be judged.

"Get my luggage out, Johnson. Three trunks, a Gladstone, hat-box, and two wooden cases."

"Yes, sir."

The man was polite, though ready to be inquisitive.

"Glad to see you again in Roxton, sir."

"Thanks."

"Cab, sir? There's Timmins's fly."

"Yes, that will do."

Murchison turned abruptly from the porter to find Miss Carmagee and Catherine kissing, and Jack tugging at his godfather's hands. It was Porteus in a new Panama hat, whose whiteness made his face look brown as an Asiatic's.

"Ah, my dear Murchison, ten minutes late; beast of a line this."

"It was good of you to come."

"Eh, what?—not a bit of it. Where's your luggage? I abhor stations; can't talk in comfort. This imp of darkness can come along with us."

An unprejudiced observer would have imagined the little man in the most peppery of tempers. He tweaked Jack by the ear, frowned hard at Catherine, and bit his mustache as though possessed by some uncontrollable spirit of impatience.

His sister was straightening her bonnet-strings.

"You can drive straight home, dear; everything is ready."

"You don't know how much I feel all this."

"There, you must be tired. We are going to take the boy to-night."

Miss Carmagee's stout figure seemed to stand like a breakwater between Catherine and the world, and there was an all-sufficing courage on her face.

People were staring; Murchison became aware of it as they moved towards the booking-office. Several familiar faces seemed to start up vividly out of the past. He noticed two porters grinning and talking together beside a pile of luggage near the bridge, and his sensitive pride concluded that they were making him their mark. The ticket collector was a thin, gray-headed man whom Murchison had known for years. He found himself conjecturing, as one conjectures over trifles at

such a pass, whether the man would remember him or not. The official received the tickets without vouchsafing a glimmer of recognition. But he stared after Murchison when he had passed, with that curious, peering insolence typical of the breed.

Outside the station a very throaty individual in a very big cap, Harris tweed suit, white stock, and mulberry red waistcoat, was giving instructions to a porter with regard to a barrow-load of luggage. A trim dog-cart stood by the curb, with a sleek little woman in a tailor-made costume perched on the seat, and looking down on everybody with something of the keenness of a hawk.

It so happened that this exquisite piece of "breeding," this Colonel Larter of county fame, stepped back against Murchison in turning towards his dog-cart.

"Beg pardon."

The words were reinforced by a surprised and rather impertinent stare.

"What!"

"Don't trouble to mention it, sir."

"How d'you do? Had heard you were knocking about down our way. Wife well?"

Colonel Larter's glance had passed the figure in black, and had fixed itself on the Carmagees and Catherine. There is always some charm about a handsome woman that can command courtesy, and Colonel Larter walked round Murchison with the *sang-froid* of a superior person, and ignored the husband in appearing impressive to the wife.

"How d'you do, Mrs. Murchison? Back in Roxton? Miss Carmagee has been keeping secrets from us. Quite a crime, I'm sure."

Catherine had seen the slighting of her husband.

"We are back again, Colonel Larter."

"That's good. To stay?" and he nodded affably to the lawyer.

"Yes, to stay."

"And the piccaninnies? Hallo, here's one of them! And where's my little flirt? What! Left her behind?"

Colonel Larter had one of those high-pitched, patronizing voices that carry a goodly distance and allow casual listeners to benefit by their remarks. Yet even his obtuse conceit was struck by Catherine Murchison's manner. A sudden sense of distance and discomfort obtruded itself upon the gentleman's consciousness. He caught Porteus Carmagee's brown, birdlike eye, and the glint thereof was curiously disconcerting.

"Expect you're busy. My wife's waiting for me; mustn't delay," and he withdrew with a jerk of his peaked cap, repassing Murchison with an oblivious serenity, and rejoining his wife, who had acknowledged the presence of acquaintances by a single inclination of the head.

"Insufferable ass! Where's that luggage? Ah, here we are," and Porteus opened the cab-door with emphasis.

"Get in, Kate, you'll find everything shipshape at home."

"You will come across later?"

"If I'm wanted."

"Then we shall expect you both. We have not thanked you yet."

"Oh, if I'm to be thanked, I sha'n't come."

"Don't say that," and Murchison's hand rested for a moment on Porteus Carmagee's shoulder.

Lombard Street again, broad, tranquil Lombard Street, warm with its red-walled houses, shaded by its cypresses, its budding elms and limes, St. Antonia's steeple clear against the blue. The old house itself, white-sashed and sun-steeped, curtains at the windows, the steps white and fresh as snow.

A head disappeared from the hall window as the cab drove up; the front door opened; they were welcomed by a homely and familiar face.

"Mary!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"This is like home."

"I'm glad, ma'am, I'm glad—"

Catherine kissed her. They were both good women, and heart met heart in that home-coming, so full of memories of mingled joy and pain.

"It is good to see you here, Mary," and Murchison held out a hand.

"Oh, sir, it was good to come."

"You will only have one to worry you now."

"It wasn't a worry, sir."

And she retreated because her weakness was a woman's weakness and showed itself in tears.

A man was helping the cabman with the luggage. He came in carrying one end of a heavy trunk, cap in hand, gaiters on legs, a smart figure that seemed a little faded and out of fortune, to judge by the threadbare cleanliness of its clothes.

"What, you here, Gage?"

The man colored up like a boy.

"Glad to see you, sir, and you, ma'am. The old house begins to look itself again."

"You are right, Gage. Old faces make a welcome surer. We shall want you if you are free."

"Only too happy, sir. Family man now, sir."

"What, married!"

"A year last Easter, sir," and he disappeared up the stairs, carrying the lower end of the trunk.

An hour had passed. Husband and wife had wandered over the whole house together, and found many an old familiar friend that had been saved from the wreck of that disastrous year. The sympathetic touch showed everywhere, a reverent and sensitive spirit had schemed and plotted to retain the past. The coloring of each room was the same as of old; much of the furniture had been rebought; the very pictures were as so many memories. It was home, and yet not the home they had known of yore.

“Does it feel strange to you?”

“Strange?”

“Yes, it is all so real, and yet there is something we shall always miss.”

They were standing together at the study window, looking out into the garden that was lit with flowers. Polyanthuses were as so many gems scattered on the brown earth of the beds. An almond-tree was still in bloom, a blush of pink against the sky. Tulips, red, white, and yellow, lifted their cups to the falling dew.

“It can never be the same, dear.”

“No.”

“Gwen?”

“Yes, our little one. And yet—in death—”

“In death?”

“My child has given me victory over myself. As I trust God, dear, I believe that curse is dead.”

“Yes, it is dead.”

“The house is cleansed; we have come home together. I am ready now to face my fellow-men.”

CHAPTER XXXII

It is said that a pretty woman is never out of patience when she has a glass to gaze at, and Betty Steel, casting critical yet complacent glances into the depths of a Venetian mirror, awaited the descent of her very particular friend, Madge Ellison, with the sweet content of a lily waiting for the moon. Mrs. Betty’s face was a Diana’s face, but her body was of the color of a blush-rose in her summer-rose dress. The figure had charm enough as it idled to and fro in the spacious, mellow-tinted room. Mirror and window showed her patronage; the one, symbolical of self alone; the other of that same self’s outlook upon life at large. Betty was in one of her most radiant moods. A letter had come for her from her husband by the morning post; his eyes were much better, and there was no cloud upon the horizon.

Parker Steel’s wife heard the frou-frou of a silk petticoat sweeping down the stairs, the sudden opening of the study door, a man’s footstep crossing the hall.

“What, out to tea again in your best frock?”

The rustling of silk ceased for a moment at the foot of the stairs. Betty Steel smiled like a wise and intelligent elder sister. Madge Ellison, and their most stylish *locum-tenens*, Dr. Little, had reached that degree of familiarity that permits two people to spar amiably with each other.

“A grievance, as usual! I suppose you grudge us the carriage?”

“Nothing half so selfish, I assure you.”

“Why not come and pay calls with us?”

“The old proverb, Miss Ellison.”

“A little goes a long way, is that it?”

“Am I so little?”

“What’s in a name!” and she passed on with a significant side glance and an arch lifting of the chin.

Dr. Little, a black-chinned, tailor-waisted, superfine person, with a distinct “air,” proceeded on a hypothetical expedition up the stairs. He had remembered leaving his latch-key in his bedroom, a useful excuse for meeting a pretty woman on the way, as though the coincidence were supremely natural.

“Au revoir.”

Miss Ellison favored him with an undeniable wink as she picked up a pink parasol from the hall table. She was one of those women who remind one forcibly of the stage-beauty as seen on very young men’s mantel-pieces. Madge Ellison would show as much of an open-work stocking as was compatible with social refinement. A *retroussé* nose and a round and rather cheeky chin associated themselves naturally with her methods of fascination.

“Madge!”

“Yes, dear.”

“Here, quick, I want you!”

“Bless my soul, why this tragic note?”

“Look, the window; do you recognize any one by the church-railings?”

There was a hard abruptness in Betty Steel’s voice. She was leaning forward with her hand on the window-sill, her face curiously changed in its expression from the purring contentment of two minutes ago.

“I see a solitary female, dear.”

“Don’t you recognize her?”

Miss Ellison gave a quaint and expressive little whistle.

“No, surely, it can’t be!”

“Kate Murchison.”

“By George, dear, it is!”

The two friends watched the figure in black disappear under the old gate-house that stood at the northwest corner of the square. For Madge Ellison there was nothing more inspiriting than curiosity in the event. To Betty Steel that passing glimpse had opened up all the hatred of the past.

“What’s in your mind, Madge?”

Miss Ellison was buttoning her gloves.

“I’ll bet a tea-cake to a penny bun, dear, that it is the Murchisons who have taken their house in Lombard Street again.”

“Nonsense!”

Betty Steel's eyes grew hard and dangerous at the suggestion.

"Why nonsense?"

"The Murchisons would hardly have the impudence to sneak back to Roxton. People don't care to be bungled into the next world by a drunkard."

"My word, Betty, draw it mild. I never heard that the man drank."

"You were in Italy, then, I believe."

"Nasty, nasty! You are peevish over the poor people's failings!"

"I hate that woman, Madge."

Miss Ellison laughed at the sincerity of her friend's spite.

"Why, what earthly harm can that woman do you by choosing to live in Roxton?"

"I tell you, Madge, there are some people in this world who set one's teeth on edge. After all, what need for all this waste of antipathy. Kate Murchison must be staying with the Carmagees. I'll risk that as my explanation."

Spirited away on a round of social duties, Betty Steel and her friend paid their third call that afternoon at the Canonry in Canon's Court, off Cloister Street. A row of carriages under the avenue of limes, and a liveried servant standing on duty under the Georgian portico, reminded Betty Steel that the third Friday in the month was the date printed on Mrs. Stensly's cards. Betty and her gossip were announced in the crowded drawing-room, where a number of bored figures were balancing teacups and talking with forced animation. A few men, severely saddened by their responsibilities, were treading on each other's heels, and looking anxiously for ladies who would take pity on sandwiches or cake. The French windows of the room were open to the May sunshine of the garden, and the fringes of a cedar could be seen sweeping the sleek grass.

Individual faces disassociate themselves slowly from such an assemblage, and Betty Steel, blockaded under the lee of a grand-piano, had but half the room under the ken of her keen eyes. Madge Ellison had been left to chat with Mr. Keightly, a very popular and enthusiastic curate who had rendered his character doubly fascinating by professing to hold prejudices in favor of celibacy. Betty had a brewer's wife at her elbow. They had exchanged ecstatic confidences on the exquisite shape and color of Mrs. Stensly's tea-service, and were both groping for some further topic to keep the conversation moving.

"And how is the play going, Mrs. Steel?"

"The play?"

Mrs. Betty seemed unusually pensive and distraught.

"Lady Sophia's play."

"As well as a piece can go—with amateurs. We all find fault with our neighbors."

"I hear it is a splendid little play."

"Not at all bad."

"I must say I like the pathetic style of play."

"Oh yes, quite charming."

"I saw Julia Neilson play in that play, oh—what was the play called?—"

"'A Woman of no Ideal,' most likely," thought Mrs. Betty. "I wonder how many more times she is going to tread on that one unfortunate word."

She waited demurely for the title to recur, but it appeared lost in the limbo of the fat lady's mind. The brewer's wife continued to grope for it like a conscientious housewife who has lost the Sabbath threepenny bit in her glove-box while dressing for church.

Betty Steel, however, had become utterly oblivious of her presence for the moment. She was gazing towards one of the open windows where a woman's figure, tall and comely in simple black, showed against the rich green of the grass. The woman's back was turned towards the room, but Betty knew her by her figure and the lustre of her hair.

"Very odd, Mrs. Steel, I can't remember the name of that play."

"Really, I beg your pardon, I was thinking of other things."

A slight rearranging of this aggregate of Roxton culture released Betty Steel from this amiable mass of irresponsible bathos. She contrived to wedge herself beside Madge Ellison, whose *retroussé* nose had failed to tempt the celibate to expand.

"You see?"

A smart hat was tilted significantly towards the window.

"I do."

"Any news?"

"You have lost, dear. The tea-cake is on top. The sensation of Roxton. They are here to stay."

Mrs. Betty's face expressed infinite pity.

"How eccentric!"

"Kate Murchison has had money left her."

"And the husband?"

"I hear his plate is up in Lombard Street."

Whether it was a mere matter of coincidence or the working of a definite purpose, the fact was curiously self-evident to Betty Steel that the drawing-room of the Canonry had divided itself into two camps. Window-ward sat Miss Carmagee, dressed in black, her large face shining like a buckler against the embattled foe. Porteus—the irascible Porteus who blasphemed all tea-parties—was chattering like a little brown baboon. Several of Kate Murchison's old friends appeared to have congregated together on the opposition benches. Mrs. Betty remarked all this, and her mouth grew a mere line in her pale and alert face.

The breweress had risen to depart. A number of nervous people who had been waiting for some bold spirit to initiate the movement, followed the fat lady's inspiriting example. Mrs. Stensly was in the garden. The breweress and her flock of sheep filed through the open window to shake hands—and go.

"Madge."

“Hallo, dear, am I sitting on you? Whither away?”

“To pay my most dutiful respects!”

Catherine Murchison and the Canon had left the window, and were pacing the grass under the benisons of the great cedar. By the expression of their faces, and the serious yet sympathetic inflection of their voices, they had broken the mere social surface, and were speaking of deeper things. It is the fashion to abuse the priesthood in the abstract, yet any critic who took the clean-girt manliness of Canon Stensly’s character might find his rhetoric chilled in its free flow.

“You have done the right thing, and your true friends will be glad of it.”

“It was my husband’s wish.”

“The wish of a brave man.”

“What a wonderful thing is sympathy! You have helped me so much this afternoon. It was an ordeal. You know, we dread the unknown—uncertainty.”

The big, gray-headed man looked down at her with much of the affection of a father. His hands had given her confirmation and joined her hand in marriage.

“Doubt is a great distorting glass,” he said, simply; “the difficulties of life decrease the moment they are faced.”

“I am glad you are on our side.”

“I should be a poor Christian if I were not.”

A figure in a pink dress, sumptuous and perfect as to the milliner’s craft, glided across the grass, and cast a shadow at Catherine’s feet.

“How d’you do, Kate? You have surprised us all—assuredly.”

The two women touched hands. Betty Steel’s drawl ascended towards patronage. She assumed the air of a mistress of a *salon* whose salutation decided destinies and dispensed fame.

“How is Dr. Murchison? This long rest must have done him good.”

“Thanks. My husband is very well.”

“I am afraid we all misunderstood your plans. We thought you had left Roxton for good. I suppose Dr. Murchison will not expose himself again to the strain of general practice. Surgical cases are such a responsibility.”

It is the ability of women to be politely insolent and to cover a taunt with ironical courtesy. There were at least a dozen people within range of Mrs. Betty’s aggressive drawl, and Betty Steel had no intention of letting Roxton forget James Murchison’s past.

“And how are the children?”

Her eyes were studying the details of Catherine’s dress with the critical acuteness so trying to a woman.

“The boy is very well, thanks.”

“And the other—a girl, was it not?”

“You need not trouble to remember her.”

“That sounds as though you were disappointed. I remember how you used to read me texts on the divinity of motherhood.”

“The child is dead, Betty, that is all.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I always thought the girl was delicate.”

Canon Stensly’s massive shadow interposed itself between the slighter silhouettes upon the grass.

“Your husband has kept his promise, Mrs. Murchison.”

“Is he here?”

“Yes, yonder, with my wife.”

Betty Steel’s face was tinged with a malignity that leaked from her eyes and from the sneering angles of her mouth. She felt glad that Catherine’s favorite child was dead. The incomprehensible malice in the thought justified itself in the reflection that Catherine had lost something that she, Betty, had always lacked.

She passed James Murchison as she returned towards the house, a man with a certain dignity of past suffering writ heavily upon his face. He was talking to two old friends. Betty swept by him without troubling to notice whether he bowed to her or not. The man was a mere pawn in the game so far as she was concerned. Any humiliation that he might suffer was only valuable so far as it humiliated his wife.

The carriage was waiting for them under the limes of Canon’s Court. Madge Ellison flounced down in her corner with a relieved sigh.

“What a function! Well, how is she, charming as ever?”

“Who?”

“You know whom I mean, Betty?”

“That beast?”

“I heard you call her that once when we were at school,” and Miss Ellison tittered; “I believe she’ll make the whole town swallow the past.”

“Will she—indeed!”

“You don’t relish the idea?”

“Wait, my dear girl; we have not seen the end of the game yet.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

Roxton, like a certain lady of literary fame, was ever ready with its free opinions on any subject that it did not understand. The return of the Murchisons had exercised the town’s capacity for criticism, and inaugurated a debate that was to be heard at public-house bars, as well as in the parlors of the pious. The facts of the case were generally agreed upon; but facts are things that the

ingenious mind of man can juggle with. The complexion of the affair varied with the convictions of the debater, and the sacred incidents of home life profaned or honored according to the temper of the tongue that dealt with them.

In Mill Lane the case had a most energetic exponent in the person of Mr. William Bains, the sweep. A certain brewer's drayman, who had won some crude celebrity as an atheist, had taken upon himself to argue on the adverse side. The two gentlemen squared to each other one evening at the bottom of the lane, and thrashed it out strenuously before a meagre but attentive crowd.

"What about the inquest? Didn't we read the 'ole of it in the *Mail and Times*? Yer can't get away from facts, can yer?"

"And supposin' he did make a mistake for once, does that mean callin' a man a fool and a danger to the public? Who drove his cart last week into a pillar-box by Wilson's grocery shop?"

Mr. Bains scored a palpable hit. The audience laughed.

"Got 'im there, William," said a neighbor.

The drayman sniffed, and threw out his stomach.

"Facts is facts. Doctorin' ain't drivin' 'osses."

"Thank the Lord, Mr. Sweetyer, it ain't, for our sakes."

"I say the man blundered."

"And who 'asn't run 'is nose into a lamp-post on occasions? Why, look 'ere," and Mr. Bains stretched out a didactic forefinger, "when my little girl 'ad the diphtheria, who pulled 'er through? And who saved old Jenny Lowther's leg? And there was young Ben Thompson, who some London joker swore was a dyin' man!"

"That's true," said a bony woman in an old red blouse.

The drayman, finding the neighbors inclined to take the sweep's view of the matter, began to look hot, and a little nettled.

"Well, what 'ave yer got to say about the booze?" he asked.

"I reckon that's more your business than mine."

Again the audience caught the gibe and laughed.

"Three gallons a day, that's 'is measure," interjected a morose gentleman, who was hanging over his garden gate and smoking the stump of a clay pipe.

"Wasn't 'e carried 'ome from the club?"

"P'r'aps 'e was, p'r'aps 'e wasn't. Any fool could 'ave seen that the man 'ad been workin' hisself to death. Why, he fainted bang off one mornin', round at our 'ouse. Ask my missus. A thimbleful o' brandy would 'ave made a man in 'is state 'ug the railin's."

"Anyhow, he hugged 'em," said the obdurate opponent.

"We ain't always responsible for what we do when we've 'ad a bad smack over the side of the jaw."

"Doct'rs oughtn't ter touch it."

"You're a nice one to preach, now, ain't yer?"

"He is that," quoth the laconic worthy at the gate.

"Look 'ere, don't you go shovin' it into me—sideways."

"Let me argue 'im, Mr. Catt."

"Argue, you 'ain't got a leg to stand on!"

"Haven't I, my boy!" and the two disputants began to glare.

The drayman wiped his hands on the back of his breeches.

"Some fool'll be callin' me a liar soon," he remarked.

"It's on the cards."

"Look 'ere, Bill Bains, I've 'ad enough of your sarce. Stow it."

"You go and bully your kids. Can't I speak my mind when I bloomin' well like?"

"Course 'e can," said the lady in the red blouse; "and 'e speaks it well, 'e does. Murchison was always a right down gentleman; better than that there little nipper, Steel."

"Right for you, Mrs. Penny. We don't go blackguardin' other people's characters, do we?"

"I ain't blackguardin' the man, I'm statin' facts."

"Facts, facts—why, the man's clean daft on facts. Facts must be another name for a pint of bitter."

"I'll smash your jaw, Bill Bains, if you don't stow it."

"Smash away, my buck. Who's afraid of a bloomin' cask?"

Whereon the dwellers in Mill Lane were treated to an exhibition of two minutes straight hitting, an exhibition that ended in the intervention of friends. But since the drayman departed with a red nose and a swollen eye, it may be inferred that the sweep had the best of the argument.

To have one's past, present, and future dragged through the back streets of a country town is not an experience that a man of self-respect would welcome. A sensitive spirit cannot fail to feel the atmosphere about it. It may see the sun shining, the clouds white against the blue, the natural phenomena of health and of well-being; or the faces of a man's fellows may be as sour puddles to him, their sympathy a wet December.

Trite as the saying is, that in trouble we make trial of our friends, only those who have faced defeat know the depth and meaning of that time-worn saying. A week in Roxton betrayed to Catherine and her husband the number and the sincerity of their friends. The instinct of pride is wondrous quick in detecting truth from shams, even as an expert's fingers can tell old china by the feel. The population of the place was soon mapped out into the priggishly polite, the piously distant, the vulgarly inquisitive, the unaffected honest, and the honestly indifferent. Catherine met many a face that brightened to hers in the Roxton streets. The past seemed to have banked more good-will for them then they had imagined. It was among the poor that they found the least forgetfulness, less of the cultured and polite hauteur, less affectation, less hypocrisy. As for the practice, they found it non-existent that first humiliating yet half-happy week.

But perhaps the sincerest person in Roxton at that moment was the wife of Dr. Parker Steel.

Betty was not a passionate woman in the matter of her affections, but in her capabilities for hatred she concentrated the energy of ten. She had come quite naturally to regard herself as the most gifted and interesting feminine personality that Roxton could boast. Every woman has an instinctive conviction that her own home, and her own children, are immeasurably superior to all others. With Betty Steel, this spirit of womanly egotism had been largely centred on herself. She had no children to make her jealous and critical towards other women's children. It was the symmetry of her own success in life that had developed into an enthralling art, an art that absorbed her whole soul.

It might have been imagined that she had climbed too high to trouble about an old hate; that she was too sufficiently assured of her own glory to stoop to attack a humbled rival. Jealousy and a sneaking suspicion of inferiority had embittered the feud for her of old; and Kate Murchison, saddened and aged, half a suppliant for the loyalty of a few good friends, could still inspire in Betty a spirit of aggressive and impatient hate. She remembered that she had seen Catherine triumphant where she herself had received indifference and disregard. The instinct to crush this antipathetic rival was as fierce and keen in her as ever.

"Call on her," had been Madge Ellison's suggestion.

"Call on her!"

"It would be more diplomatic."

"Do you imagine, Madge, that I am going to make advances to that woman? She used to snub me once; my turn has come. I give the Murchisons just six months in Roxton."

How little mercy Betty Steel had in that intolerant and subtle heart of hers was betrayed by the strategic move that opened the renewal of hostilities. She had driven Kate Murchison out of Roxton once, and the arrogance of conquest was as fierce in this slim, refined-faced woman as in any Alexander. She moved in a small and limited sphere, but the aggressive spirit was none the less inevitable in its lust to overthrow. The motives were the meaner for their comparative minuteness.

Lady Sophia's Bazaar Committee met in Roxton public hall one day towards the end of May, to consider the arrangement of stalls, and to settle a number of decorative details. Betty had spent half the morning at her escritoire sorting letters, meditating chin on hand, scribbling on the backs of old envelopes, which she afterwards took care to burn.

She seemed in her happiest vein that afternoon, as she left Madge Ellison to provide tea for Dr. Little, and drove to the public hall with her despatch-box full of the Bazaar Fund's correspondence. No one would have imagined it possible for such refinement and charm to cover instincts that were not unallied to the instincts found in an Indian jungle. Mrs. Betty went through her business with briskness and precision; the committee left their chairs to discuss the grouping of the stalls about the room. There were to be twelve of these booths, each to represent a familiar flower; Lady Sophia had elected herself a rose. Mrs. Betty's choice had been Oriental poppies.

Lady Sophia was parading the hall with a pair of pince-nez perched on the bridge of her nose, and a memorandum-book open in her hand. A group of deferential ladies followed her like hens about the farmer's wife at feeding-time. The most trivial suggestion that fell from those aristocratic lips was seized upon and swallowed with relish.

"Betty, dear, have you heard from Jennings about the draperies?"

The glory of it, to be "my deared" in public by Lady Sophia Gillingham!

"Yes, I have a letter somewhere, and a list of prices."

"You might pin up the letter and the price-list on the black-board by the door, so that the stall-holders can take advantage of any item that may be of use to them."

Betty moved to the table and rummaged amid her multifarious correspondence. She was chatting all the while to a Miss Cozens, a thin, wiry little woman, alert as a Scotch-terrier in following up the scent of favor.

"What a lot of work the bazaar has given you, Mrs. Steel!"

"Yes, quite enough," and she divided her attention between Miss Cozens and the pile of papers.

"When is the next rehearsal?"

"Tuesday, I believe."

"I hear you are the genius of the play."

"Am I?" and Betty smiled like an ingenuous girl. "I am most horribly nervous. I always feel that I am spoiling the part. Oh, here's Jennings's letter, and the list, I think."

She left the two papers lying unheeded for the moment, while she answered Miss Cozens's interested questions on costume.

"Primrose and leaf green, that will be lovely."

"Yes, so everybody says."

Lady Sophia's voice interrupted the gossip. She was beckoning to Betty with her memorandum-book.

"Betty, can you spare me a moment?"

Miss Cozens's sharp eyes gave an envious twinkle.

"Shall I pin up the papers for you, Mrs. Steel?"

"Would you?"

"With pleasure."

And Betty swept two sheets of paper towards Miss Cozens without troubling to glance at them, and turned to wait on Lady Sophia.

Several ladies congregated about the black-board as Miss Cozens pinned up the letter and the price-list with such conscientious promptitude that she had not troubled to read their contents. Had she had eyes for the faces of her neighbors she might have been struck by the puzzled eagerness of their expression. One elderly committee woman readjusted her glasses, and then touched Miss Cozens with a pencil that she carried.

"Excuse me."

"Yes."

"There is some mistake—I think."

“Mistake?”

“Yes, that letter”—and the spectacled lady pointed to the black-board with her pencil.

Miss Cozens took the trouble to investigate the charge. The letter was written on one broad sheet in a neat, bold hand. Miss Cozens’s prim little mouth pursed itself up expressively as she read; her brows contracted, her eyes stared.

“Good Heavens!—what’s this? I must have taken the wrong letter.”

She tore the sheet down, pushed past her neighbors, and crossed the room towards Betty Steel. The group about the black-board appeared to be discussing the incident. Mr. Jennings’s list of silks and drapings seemed forgotten.

“Mrs. Steel, excuse me—”

“Yes?”

“This letter; there’s some mistake. It’s the wrong one. I pinned it up, and Mrs. Saker called my attention to the error.”

“Let me see.”

Miss Cozens gave her the sheet, intense curiosity quivering in every line of her doglike face.

“Good Heavens!—how did this get mixed up with my business correspondence?”

She looked perturbation to perfection.

“Miss Cozens, what am I to do? Has any one read it?”

The little woman nodded.

“How horrible! I must explain—It must not go any further.”

Betty hurried across the hall towards the door, hesitated, and looked round her as though baffled by indecision. She knew well enough that inquisitive eyes were watching her. Her skill as an actress—and she was consummately clever as a hypocrite—served to heighten the meaning that she wished to convey.

“Lady Sophia.”

Betty had doubled adroitly in the direction of the amiable aristocrat.

“Yes, dear—”

“Can I speak to you alone?”

“What is it?”

“Oh, I have done such an awful thing. Do help me. You have so much nerve and tact.”

“My dear child, steady yourself.”

“I looked out Jennings’s papers; Miss Cozens was chattering to me, and when you called me, she offered to pin the things on the board. How on earth it happened, I cannot imagine, but a private letter of mine had got mixed up with the bazaar correspondence. It must have been lying by Jennings’s list, for Miss Cozens, without troubling to read it, pinned it on the board.”

The perturbed, sensitive creature was breathless and all a-flutter. Lady Sophia patted her arm.

“Well, dear, I see no great harm yet—”

“Wait! It was a letter from an old friend abroad, a letter that contained certain confessions about a Roxton family. What on earth am I to do? Look, here it is, read it.”

Lady Sophia read the letter, holding it at arm’s-length like the music of a song.

“Good Heavens, Betty, I never knew the man drank, that it had been a habit—”

“Don’t, Lady Sophia, don’t!”

“You should have been more careful.”

“I know—I know. I shall never forgive myself. For goodness’ sake, help me. You have so much more tact than I.”

Her ladyship accepted the responsibility with stately unction.

“Leave it to me, dear. I can go round and have a quiet talk with all those who happened to read the letter. How unfortunate that the opening sentences should have contained this information. Still, it need never get abroad.”

“How good of you!”

“There, dear, you are rather upset, most naturally so—”

“I think I had better retreat.”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

“Thank you, oh, so much. Tell them not to whisper a word of it.”

“There will be no difficulty, dear, about that.”

Betty, white and troubled, added a sharper flavor to the stew by withdrawing dramatically from the stage. And any one wise as to the contradictoriness of human nature could have prophesied how the news would spread had he seen the Lady Sophia voyaging on her diplomatic mission round the hall.

“Poor Mrs. Steel! Such an unfortunate coincidence! Not a woman easily upset, but, believe me, my dear Mrs. So-and-So, it was as much a shock to her as though she had heard bad news of her husband. Now, I am quite sure this unpleasant affair will go no further. Of course not. I rely absolutely on your discretion.”

And since the discretion of a provincial town is complex to a degree of an ever-repeated confession, coupled with a solemn warning against repetition, it was not improbable that this froth would haunt the pot for many a long day.

CHAPTER XXXIV

June is the month for the old world garden that holds mystery and fragrance within its red-brick walls. In Lombard Street you would suspect no wealth of flowers, and yet in the passing through of one of those solid, mellow, Georgian houses you might meet dreams from the bourn of a charmed sleep.

Aloofness is the note of such a garden. It is no piece of pompous mosaic-work spread before the front windows of a stock-broker's villa, a conventional color scheme to impress the public. The true garden has no studied ostentation. It is a charm apart, a quiet corner of life smelling of lavender, built for old books, and memories that have the mystery of hills touched by the dawn. You will find the monk's-hood growing in tall campaniles ringing a note of blue; columbines, fountains of gold and red; great tumbling rose-trees like the foam of the sea; stocks all a-bloom; pansies like antique enamel-work; clove-pinks breathing up incense to meet the wind-blown fragrance of elder-trees in flower. You may hear birds singing as though in the wild deeps of a haunted wood whose trees part the sunset into panels of living fire.

Mary of the plain face and the loyal heart had opened the green front door to a big man, whose broad shoulders seemed fit to bear the troubles of the whole town. He had asked for Catherine and her husband.

"They are in the garden, sir."

"Alone?"

"Yes, only Master Jack."

Canon Stensly bowed his iron-gray head under the Oriental curtain that screened the passage leading from the hall to the garden.

"Thanks; I know the way."

The Rector of St. Antonia's came out into the sunlight, and stood looking about him for an instant with the air of a man whose eyes were always open to what was admirable in life. A thrush had perched itself on the pinnacle of a yew, and was singing his vesper-song with the broad west for an altar of splendid gold. The chiming of the hour rang from St. Antonia's steeple half hid by the green mist of its elms. A few trails of smoke rising from red-brick chimney-stacks alone betrayed the presence of a town.

To an old college-man such an evening brought back memories of sunny courts, cloisters, and sleek lawns, the ringing of bells towards sunset, the dark swirl of a river under the yawn of bridges that linked gardens to gardens beneath the benisons of mighty trees. Yet the light on Canon Stensly's face was not wholly a placid light. It was as though he came as a messenger from the restless, bickering outer world, a friend whom friendship freighted with words not easy to be said.

A glimmer of white under an old cherry-tree showed where Catherine sat reading, with the boy Jack prone on the grass, the *Swiss Family Robinson* under his chin. Murchison was lying back in a deck-chair, watching the smoke from his pipe amid the foliage overhead.

Master Jack, rolling from elbow to elbow, as he thrilled over the passage of the "tub-boat" from the wreck, caught sight of the Canon crossing the lawn. Catherine was warned by a tug at her skirts, and a very audible stage-aside.

"Look out, here's old Canon Stensly—"

"S-sh, Jack."

"Should like to see him afloat in a tub-boat. Take a big—"

A tweak of the ear nipped the boy's reflection in the bud. His father gave him a significant push in the direction of the fruit garden.

"See if there are any strawberries ripe."

"I've looked twice, dad."

"Oh, no doubt. Go and look again."

Canon Stensly's big fist had closed on Catherine's fingers. He was not the conventional figure, the portly, smiling cleric, the man of the world with a benignant yet self-sufficient air. Like many big men, silent and peculiarly sensitive, his quiet manner suggested a diffidence anomalous in a man of six feet two. To correct the impression one had but to look at the steady blue of the eye, the firm yet sympathetic mouth, the stanchness of the chin. It is a fallacy that lives perennially, the belief that a confident face, an aggressive manner, and much facility of speech necessarily mark the man of power.

A courtly person would have remarked on the beauty of the evening, and discovered something in the garden to praise. Canon Stensly was not a man given to pleasant commonplaces. He said nothing, and sat down.

Murchison handed him his cigar-case.

"Thanks, not before dinner."

His habit of silence, the silence of a man who spoke only when he had something definite to say, gave him, to strangers, an expression of reserve. Canon Stensly invariably made talkative men feel uncomfortable. It was otherwise with people who had learned to know the nature of his sincerity.

"Hallo, what literature have we here?"

He picked up Jack's discarded book, and turned over the pages as though the illustrations brought back recollections of his own youth. As a boy he had been the most irrepressible young mischief-monger, a youngster whom Elisha would have bequeathed to the bear's claws.

"Ever a member of the Robinson family, Mrs. Murchison?"

Catherine caught a suspicious side glint in his eye.

"I suppose all children read the book."

"I wonder how much of the moralizing you remember?"

"Very little, I'm afraid."

"Nor do I. Children demand life—not moralizing upon life," and the Canon scrutinized a picture portraying the harpooning of a turtle, as though he had gloated over that picture many times as a boy.

Catherine had caught a glimpse of Mary's white apron signalling for help in some domestic problem. She was glad of the excuse to leave the two men together. The sense of a woman is never more in evidence than when she surrenders her husband to a friend.

"Can you spare me half an hour for a talk?"

"I am not overburdened with work—yet."

“Oh, it will come.”

He turned over the pages deliberately, glancing at each picture.

“Your wife looks well.”

“Yes, in spite of everything.”

“A matter of heart and pluck.”

“She has the courage of a Cordelia.”

Canon Stensly put the book down upon the grass. The two men were silent awhile; Murchison lying back in his chair, smoking; the churchman leaning forward a little with arms folded, his massive face set rather sternly in the repose of thought.

“There is something I want to talk to you about.”

Murchison turned his head, but did not move his body.

“Yes?”

“Don’t set me down as a busybody. I think I have a duty to you as a friend. It is a matter of justice.”

The Canon’s virtues were of the practical, workman-like order. He was not an eloquent man in the oratorical sense, having far too straightforward and sincere a personality to wax hysterical for the benefit of a church full of women. But he was a man who was listened to by men.

Murchison turned half-restlessly in his chair.

“With reference to the old scandal?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Something unpleasant, of course.”

“Things that are put about behind one’s back are generally unpleasant. It was my wife who discovered the report. Women hear more lies than we do, you know.”

“As a rule.”

“I decided that it was only fair that you should know, since slandered people are generally the last to hear of their own invented sins.”

“Thanks. I appreciate honesty.”

Canon Stensly sat motionless a moment, staring at the house. Then he rose up leisurely from his chair, reached for one of the branches of the cherry-tree, drew it down and examined the forming fruit.

“They say that you used to drink.”

Murchison remained like an Egyptian Memnon looking towards Thebes. The churchman talked on.

“I have heard the same thing said about one or two of my dearest friends. Vile exaggerations of some explainable incident. The report originated from a certain lady who resides over against my church. Her husband is a professional man.”

He pulled down a second bough, and brushed the young fruit with his fingers to see whether it was set or not. The silence had something of the tension of expense. Murchison knew that this old friend was waiting for a denial.

“That’s quite true; I drank—at one time.”

A man of less ballast and less unselfishness would have rounded on the speaker, perhaps with an affected incredulity that would have embittered the consciousness of the confession. Canon Stensly did nothing so insignificant. He let the branch of the cherry-tree slip slowly through his fingers, put his hands in his pockets, and walked aside three paces as though to examine the tree at another angle.

“Tell me about it.”

There was a pause of a few seconds.

“My father drank; poor old dad! I’m not trying to shelve the affair by putting it on his shoulders. My father and my grandfather both died of drink. My wife knows. She did not know when we were married. That was wrong. If ever a man owed anything to the love of a good woman, I am that man.”

Canon Stensly returned to his chair. His face bore the impress of deep thought. He had the air of a man ready to help in the bearing of a brother’s burden, not with any bombast and display, but as though it were as natural an action as holding out a hand.

“It can’t have been very serious,” he said.

Murchison set his teeth.

“A sort of hell while it lasted, a tempting of the devil; not often; perhaps the worse for that.”

“Ah, I can understand.”

“It was when I was overworked.”

“Jaded.”

“The wife was something better than a ministering angel, she was a brave woman. She fought for me. We should have won—without that scandal, but for a mad piece of folly I took to be heroism.”

The churchman extended a large hand.

“I’ll smoke after all,” he said.

“Do.”

Murchison opened his cigar-case. Canon Stensly was as deliberate as a man wholly at his ease. There was not a tremor as he held the lighted match.

“Do you know, Murchison, I appreciate this—deeply?”

He returned the match-box.

“It puts you in a new light to me, a finer light, with that rare wife of yours.”

Murchison was refilling his pipe, lines of thought crossing his forehead.

“When my child died—”

“Yes—”

“I seemed to lose part of myself. I had crushed the curse then. I don’t know how to explain the

psychology of the affair, but when she died, the other thing died also."

Canon Stensly nodded.

"It was what we call dipsomania. I never touched alcohol for years. I had been a fool as a student. At my worst, I only had the crave now and again."

"And you are sure—"

"Sure that that curse killed my child, indirectly. Is it strange that her death should have killed the curse?"

"As I trust in God, no."

The thrush was singing again on the yew-tree, another thrush answering it from a distant garden. Canon Stensly lay back in his chair and smiled.

"Stay here," he said, quietly.

"In Roxton?"

"Yes. You have friends. Trust them. There is a greater sense of justice in this world than most cynics allow. I never knew man fight a good fight, a clean up-hill fight, and lose in the end."

They were smoking peacefully under the cherry-tree when Catherine returned. She had no suspicion of what had passed, for no storm spirit had left its torn clouds in the summer air. Her husband's face was peculiarly calm and placid.

"Where's that boy of yours, Mrs. Murchison?"

"Jack?"

"Yes."

"He was hunting the strawberry-beds half an hour ago."

"Tell him," and the Canon chuckled, "tell him I am not too big yet—for a tub."

"Oh, Canon Stensly—"

"My dear Mrs. Murchison, I said many a truer thing when I was a boy. Children strike home. To have his vanity chastened, let a man listen to children."

The big man with the massive head and the broad British chest had gone. Husband and wife were sitting alone under the cherry-tree.

"You told him—all?"

"All, Kate."

"And it was Betty? That woman! May she never have to bear what we have borne!"

Murchison was sitting with his elbows on his knees, his chin upon his fists.

"Well—they know the worst—at last," he said, grimly. "We can clear for action. That's a grand man, Kate. I shall stay and fight—fight as he would were he in my place."

She stretched out a hand and let it rest upon his shoulder.

"You are what I would have you be, brave. Our chance will come."

"God grant it."

"You shall show these people what manner of man you are."

CHAPTER XXXV

Dr. Little descended the stairs of Major Murray's house with the alert and rather furtive look of a man who has been for days subjected to the semi-sceptical questions of interested relatives. Parker Steel had attended at the introduction of a third Miss Murray into the world; the whole affair had seemed but the ordinary yearly incident in the great, rambling, florid-faced house, whose windows appeared to have copied its owner's military stare. It was during Dr. Little's regency that Major Murray's wife had developed certain sinister symptoms that had worried the locum-tenens very seriously. Concern for his own self-conceit rather than concern for the patient, characterized Dr. Little's attitude towards the case. The professional spirit when cultivated to the uttermost end of complexity, becomes an impersonation of the intellectual ego.

A thin, acute-faced woman with sandy hair appeared at the dining-room door as Dr. Little reached the hall. This lady with the sandy hair and freckles happened to be the most inquisitive, suspicious, and unrebuffable of sisters that Dr. Little had ever encountered on guard over her brother's domestic happiness.

"Good-morning."

"Damn the woman—Ah, good-morning."

Miss Murray's attitude betrayed the inevitable catechisation. Dr. Little followed her into the dining-room.

"And how do you find my sister-in-law this morning. Dr. Little?"

Miss Murray had an aggressive, expeditious manner that disorganized any ordinary mortal's sense of self-sufficiency and vain repose. In action her hair seemed to become sandier in color, her freckles more yellow and independent. In speech she reminded the *locum-tenens* of a quick-firing gun whose exasperating detonations numbered so many snaps a minute.

"Mrs. Murray is no worse this morning. In fact—I can—"

"The temperature?"

"The temperature is a little above normal."

Dr. Little's "distinguished air" became ten times more distinguished. He articulated in his throat, and began to pull on his gloves with gestures of great finality.

"Did you notice that reddish rash?"

"It is our duty, Miss Murray, to notice such things."

"And the throat? It seems very red and angry—"

"A certain degree of pharyngitis is present."

"Well, and what's the meaning of it all, Dr. Little?"

"Meaning, Miss Murray? Really—"

“There’s a cause for everything, I imagine.”

“Certainly. The problem—”

“You admit then that there is something problematic in the case, Dr. Little.”

“There is a problem in every—”

“Of course. But in my sister-in-law’s case, that is the matter under discussion.”

“Pardon me, madam, it is impossible to discuss certain—”

“My brother desires something definite. He was obliged to go to town to-day.”

“I should prefer to give my opinion—”

“Major Murray left instructions that I should wire to his club—”

“His club?”

“Whether any definite conclusion had been arrived at.”

The two disputants had been volleying and counter-volleying at point-blank range. Neither displayed any sign of giving ground or of surrender. The Scotch lady’s voice had harshened into a slight rasp of natural Gaelic. Dr. Little still fumbled at the buttons of his gloves, his words very much in his throat, his whole pose characteristic of the profession upon its dignity.

“It is quite impossible, Miss Murray, for me to discuss this case.”

The thin lady’s pupils were no bigger than pin-heads, so that her eyes looked like two circles of hard, blue glass.

“Very well, Dr. Little. I must telegraph to my brother that no conclusion has been reached—”

“Pardon me, that would be indiscreet—”

“To provide—me—with a solution!”

The distinguished gentleman had completed the buttoning of his gloves.

“I shall hope to see Major Murray in person to-morrow.”

“You shall see him, Dr. Little, without fail.”

The *locum-tenens* conducted a dignified retreat, fully aware of the fact that the sandy-haired lady believed him to be an ignoramus.

“Confound the woman! How can I tell her what I think?” he reflected. “It seems to me that there is half a ton of domestic dynamite waiting to be exploded in that house. I hardly relish the responsibility. If matters don’t clear in a day or two, I shall wire for Steel. It is his case, not mine.”

To a much-hustled man, whose temper had been chastened by a series of irritating incidents, the picture of a pretty woman smiling up at him from a neat luncheon-table revivified the more sensuous satisfactions of existence. Men who live to eat, smoke, and enjoy the curves of a woman’s figure are in the main very docile mortals. The savor of a well-cooked entrée will dispel despair and bring down heaven.

Dr. Little sat down with a grieved sigh, unfolded his napkin, and accepted Miss Ellison’s sympathy as though it were his just and sovereign due. He still had a vision of freckles and sandy hair, and echoes of an aggressive voice that revived memories of the dame school he had attended when in frocks.

“What a morning you must have had! It is nearly two.”

“A delightful morning, I can assure you. Excuse me, Miss Ellison, the cover of that magazine you have been reading reminds me of a certain female’s hair. Would you mind removing it from sight?”

“Is the memory so poignant?”

“Poignant! And she has freckles the size of pease. Ugh! I wonder why it is that one’s patients always seem to conspire against one by being mulish and irritating all on the same day?”

“Something in the air, perhaps. Poor man!”

“Poor man, it is, I assure you, when you have had a series of cantankerous old ladies to blarney. I wonder if I might have a glass of sherry? Oh, don’t bother, let me get it.”

As though the mere offer absolved him from all further effort, Dr. Little sat still and fed while Madge Ellison rummaged in the sideboard for the decanter.

“How much, a tumblerful?”

She bent over him as she poured out the wine, the gold chain she wore dangling against his cheek.

“Thanks. Three fingers. How angelic a thing is woman!”

“Even when she has freckles and straw-colored hair?”

“Forbear, forbear. Ah, now I began to revive a little.”

He drank the wine, wiped his mustache, and leaned back in his chair as though to reflect on the natural philosophy of life. Madge Ellison entered into the system as a pleasing and satisfactory protoplasmic development. To this bachelor, who already showed a tendency to plumpness below the heart, she was bracketed with good wine, nine-penny cigars, and well-cooked dishes, a thing pleasant to look at and pleasant perhaps to taste.

“How is Mrs. Steel?”

Cutlets and new pease were pushed aside. Dr. Little helped himself generously to sponge custard, his eyes fixed affectionately upon the dish.

“I am rather worried about Betty.”

“Worried?”

The bachelor began to look sleek and happy. His outlook upon life changed greatly after a few magical passes with a spoon and fork.

“I wish you would go up and see her after lunch.”

“Anything to oblige a lady who can show no freckles. What is the woe? A cold in the head?”

Madge Ellison had returned to her chair, and was rocking it gracefully to and fro on two legs. She might have posed as a living metronome marking the rhythm for the epicure’s busy spoon.

“How frivolous you doctors are!”

Dr. Little wiped a streak of custard from his mustache with his dinner napkin.

“It is my hour of relaxation. Haven’t you heard the tale of the two bishops who played leap-frog at the end of a church conference. But, to be serious, what are the symptoms?”

“She seems rather feverish and has a sore throat. I noticed something that looked like herpes on her lip.”

“Herpes, eh? Will she let me see her?”

“I’ll run up and ask.”

“Thanks. Is the paper reposing anywhere? Oh, don’t bother. On the window-sill? Thanks, much obliged.”

And he propped the paper against the decanter, and so consoled himself with the happy facility of a bachelor.

Betty Steel, in a richly laced dressing-jacket, was sitting up in bed with Persian Mignon in her lap.

“Bring the man up, dear, if it will give you any satisfaction. Any news in the town?”

Madge Ellison sat down and chatted for five minutes, while the cat purred under Betty’s hand.

“I saw Kate Murchison in Castle Gate this morning.”

“Alone?”

“No; being convoyed by the Canoness.”

Betty Steel’s mouth curved into a sneer.

“A most respectable connection. Did you see any blue ribbon about?”

“You are rather hard on the poor wretches, Betty.”

“Am I?” and she gave a short, sharp laugh; “every woman sides with her husband—I suppose. You might rub some scent on my forehead, dear.”

Dr. Little finished a cigar, and yawned in turn over every page of the paper before ascending to Mrs. Betty’s room. Madge Ellison opened the door to him. His shoulder brushed her arm as he entered, quite the professional Agag where the patient was a woman and under fifty.

Dr. Little remained some fifteen minutes beside Mrs. Betty’s bed. His air of lazy refinement left him by degrees, giving place to the interested and puzzled alertness of the physician. It was the curious nodular swelling on Parker Steel’s wife’s lip that led him to discover glandular enlargement under her round, white chin.

“Hair falling out at all?” he asked, casually.

“Why refer to a woman’s one eternal woe?”

“Oh, nothing,” and he smiled a little stiffly; “the throat is sore, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Let me look. Turn to the light, please. Open the mouth wide, and say ‘ah.’ Hum, yes, rather inflamed,” and Dr. Little, after moving his head from side to side, like a man peering down the bowl of a pipe, drew back from the bed, his eyes fixed momentarily on Betty Steel’s face with a peculiarly intent stare.

“I’ll send you up a gargle for the throat.”

“Thanks. I shall be all right for Saturday, I suppose?”

“I hope so.”

“It is the last rehearsal. I must not miss it.”

“Have you heard from Dr. Steel to-day?”

Betty was holding Mignon’s head between her two hands, and looking into the cat’s yellow eyes. Something in the intonation of Dr. Little’s voice seemed to startle her. She glanced up at him with a questioning smile.

“I expect him back in a week or so. Madge, get me that letter, dear. I think he said next Wednesday. Is there anything—?”

Little had moved towards the door.

“I only wanted to know the date. I promised some months ago to do locum work for an old friend next week.”

Betty had glanced through her husband’s letter. She laid it aside when Dr. Little had gone, and took Mignon back into her lap.

“That man’s worried about something, Madge,” she said.

“Worried, not a bit of it, dear.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not in the bachelor nature to worry, provided food is plentiful and work slack. Pins wouldn’t prick him. They’re selfish beasts.”

“I thought you liked the man, Madge.”

“The men we flirt with, dear, are not often the men we marry.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Little had descended the stairs, looking as serious as any middle aged demi-god who had been snubbed by a school-girl. He crossed the hall to Parker Steel’s consulting-room, took out a bottle containing tabloids of perchloride of mercury from the cabinet, dissolved two in the basin fixed in one corner of the room, and sedulously and carefully disinfected his hands.

“How the devil—!”

This meditative exclamation appeared to limit the gentleman’s reflections for the moment. He stood with bent shoulders, staring at his hands soaking in the rose-tinted water, like some mediæval wiseacre striving to foresee the future in a pot of ink.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The glitter of the sea visible between the foliage of flowering-shrubs seemed to add a touch of vivacity to the June somnolence that hung like a summer mist over the south-coast town. Parker Steel, half lying in a basket-chair under a red May-tree in the hotel garden, betrayed his sympathy with the poetical paraphernalia of life by reading through a list of investments recommended by his brokers. A satisfactory breakfast followed by the contemplation of a satisfactory banking account

begets peace in the heart of man.

It was about ten o'clock, and a few enthusiasts were already quarrelling over croquet, when the hotel "buttons" came out with a telegram on a tray.

"No. 25, Dr. Steel?"

"Here."

"Any reply, sir?"

The boy waited with the tray held over that portion of his figure where his morning meal reposed, while Parker Steel tore open the envelope and read the message.

"No answer."

"Right, sir."

"Wait; tell them at the office to get my bill made up. I have to leave after lunch."

"Yes, sir."

"And bring me a time-table, and a whiskey and soda."

Parker Steel glanced at his watch, thrust the investment list into the breast-pocket of his coat, and lay back again in his chair with the telegram across his knee. Faces vary much in their expression when the mind behind the face labors with some thought that fills the whole consciousness for the moment. The smooth indolence had melted from the physician's features. His face had sharpened as faces sharpen in bitter weather, for a man who is a coward betrays his cowardice even when he thinks.

A much-grieved croquet-player in a blue-and-white check dress was confiding her criticisms to a very sympathetic gentleman in one corner of the lawn.

"It is such a pity that Mrs. Sallow cheats so abominably. I hate playing with mean people. Every other stroke is a spoon, and she is always walking over her ball, and shifting it with her skirt when it is wired."

"People give their characters away in games."

"It is so contemptible. I can't understand any self-respecting person cheating."

The continuous click of the balls appeared to irritate Parker Steel, as he sat huddled up in his chair with the telegram on his knee. He found himself listening—without curiosity—to the young lady in the blue-and-white whose complaints suggested that the immoral Mrs. Sallow was the cleverer player of the two. Dishonesty is only dishonest, to many people, when it comes within the cognizance of the law, and how thoroughly symbolical those four balls were of the opportunities mortals manipulate in life, Parker Steel might have realized had not his mind been clogged with other things.

The boy returned with a time-table and the whiskey and soda on a tray.

"A fast train leaves at 2.30, sir."

"Thanks; get me a table. You can keep the change."

"Much obliged, sir," and he touched a carefully watered forelock; "will you drive, sir, or walk?"

"Order me a cab."

"Right, sir."

And the boy noticed, as he turned away, that the hand shook that reached for the glass, and that some of the stuff was spilled before it came to the man's lips.

No one met Parker Steel at Roxton station that June evening. A porter piled his luggage on a cab, for the physician's own carriage was not forthcoming. A sense of isolation and neglect took hold upon him as he drove through the sleepy streets of the old town. Loneliness is never comforting to a man who is cursed with an irrepressible conscience, and his own restless imaginings rose like a cold fog into the June air. Parker Steel shivered as he had often shivered when driving through moonlit mists to answer a midnight message. The very elms about St. Antonia's spire had a shadowy strangeness for him, a gloom that gave nothing of the glow of a return home.

Parker Steel stood in his own dining-room, waiting and listening, as though he were in a stranger's house. Symons, the starched servant, had opened the door to him without a smile; his luggage had been carried up-stairs. He had heard voices, faint, distant voices, that had tantalized him with words that he could not understand. He had been ready to ask the woman Symons a dozen questions, but had faltered from a self-conscious fear of betraying his own thoughts. The house seemed full of some indefinable dread as the dusk deepened towards night.

A door opened above. He heard footsteps descending the stairs, so slowly in the silence of the darkening house, that the sound reminded the man of the slow drip of water into a well. Parker Steel found himself counting them as they descended towards the hall. If it was Betty, how was he to construe the message of the morning? The suffering of suspense drove him to action. He turned sharply, crossed the room, and, opening the door, looked out into the hall.

"Hallo, dear, is it you?"

She was in white, and her foot was on the last step of the stairs.

"I am glad that you have come, Parker."

"I had your wire early. I imagined—"

"That I was ill?"

"Yes, that you were ill."

She halted with one hand on the carved foot-post of the balustrading. The dusk of the hall showed nothing but a white figure and a gray oval to mark her face. Some mysterious psychic force seemed to hold husband and wife apart. Their two personalities had become incompatible through some subtle ferment of distrust.

"Parker!"

He made a step forward.

"No, I want you to go into that room and light the gas."

The insistent note in her voice repulsed him. His walk approached a self-conscious shuffle as he

turned and re-entered the darkening room. Betty heard him groping for the matches. A sudden glare of light followed the sharp purr of a flaring match. She drew a deep and sighing breath, pressed her hands to her breast, and entered the room.

Parker Steel was drawing the blinds. His wife closed the door, and waited for him to turn.

"When I had your wire, dear—"

"Yes."

"I wondered what I should find—here. The wording—Good Heavens, Betty—"

She stood back from him and leaned against the sideboard, the glare from the gas falling full upon her face. It was red, repulsive, tinged with an ooze that had hardened here and there into yellow scabs.

"You see, Parker, why I sent for you."

He looked for the moment like a man shocked into immobility by a sudden storm of wind and sleet beating on his face.

"When did this appear?"

He moved towards her, the shallow gleam of sympathy in his eyes darkened by something more terrible than mere fear. Betty stood her ground. It was the man who betrayed the incoherency of panic.

"Come, tell me."

His eyes were fixed upon her face, upon her mouth.

"It is I, Parker, who want to know—"

"Yes, yes, of course, dear, I can understand. You should have sent for me sooner."

Intuition is a gift of the gods to women, a power—almost unholy in its brilliant reading of the hearts of others. Betty's eyes were searching her husband's face as though it were some delicately finished miniature in which every piece of shading had significance. Her breath came and went more deeply than when life had a normal flow. For all else she was cold, very quiet, the mistress even of her own repulsive face.

"I want you to tell me, Parker—"

She saw the muscles about his mouth quiver.

"Have you seen any one?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Dr. Little, and Dr. Brimley."

"Well? What—?"

"They would tell me nothing."

"Nothing?"

She saw him breathe out deeply like a man who has seen a child escape the wheels of a heavy cart.

"They gave me mere phrases, Parker. A woman can tell when men are hiding the truth."

"What had they to hide, dear? Come closer—here—to the light."

She did not stir.

"I must know, Parker."

"Yes, of course."

"The whole truth. Listen—I happened to go yesterday morning into your consulting-room. Dr. Little had been reading; he had left the book open—at a certain page. You know, Parker, that many men only read the big text-books when they are puzzled by a particular case."

Steel's face seemed nothing but a gray and frightened mask to her.

"Betty, you are imagining things—"

"Well, tell me the truth."

"A form of eczema."

"Parker!"

Her voice had the ring of iron in it.

"That was not the word I read."

"Good God, Betty!"

"It was this."

She spoke the word without flinching, with a distinctness that had that cold and terrible conciseness that science loves. Her eyes did not leave her husband's face. Even as he answered her, hotly, haltingly, she knew him to be a liar.

"Impossible! You are seizing on a mad coincidence, a mere ridiculous conclusion. I can swear—"

"Yes, swear—"

"That it is nothing, nothing of what you have said."

His eyes had the furtive fierceness of eyes searching her soul for unbelief.

"Come, Betty, wife—"

She remained unmoved.

"What? You think that I—"

"No, don't touch me. I don't believe that you have told me the truth."

"Not believe—that I—!"

"No, God help me, I cannot!"

Her body had hardly changed the pose that it had taken from the first moment. It was as though it had stiffened with the slow, pitiless hardening of her heart. Parker Steel looked at her like the moral coward that he was, too crushed by his own keen consciousness of shame to pretend to the courage that he could not boast.

"Betty, am I—?"

She flung aside from him with an indescribable gesture of passionate repulsion.

"Don't. I can't look at you, or be looked at. Madge is waiting for me. They will bring you your dinner. Good-night."

She moved towards the door.

"Betty—"

He would have hindered her, but the manhood in him had neither the power nor the pride. She swept out and left him. He heard the sound of sobbing as she climbed the stairs.

"Good God—!"

Parker Steel stood listening, staring at the door, a man who could neither think nor act.

CHAPTER XXXVII

On two successive days the society of loafers that lounged outside the gates of Roxton station for the ostensible purpose of carrying hand-bags and parcels, had noticed Major Murray's red-wheeled dog-cart meet the afternoon express from town. The society of luggage loafers boasted a membership of four. It was not an energetic brotherhood, and had put up a living protest against the unseemly scurry and bustle of twentieth-century methods. The society's loafing ground ran along the white fence that closed in the "goods" yard, a fence that carried, from four distinct patches of discoloration, the marks left by the brothers' bodies in their postures of dignified and independent ease.

All the comings and goings of Roxton seemed known to these four gentlemen, whose eyes were ever on the alert, though their hands remained in their trousers-pockets. A fly basking on the sidewalk within six feet would be seen and dislodged by a brisk discharge of saliva from between one of the member's lips. Like Diogenes, they "had reduced impertinence to a fine art"; and the major portion of the society's funds was patriotically disbursed to swell the state's revenue on beer.

"Psst—'Ere 'e is ag'in."

"'oo?"

A mouth was wiped by the back of a hand.

"Murray's man."

"Same un?"

"Yas. Little feller with the twirly mustache. What d'yer guess 'e be, Jack?"

"Looks as though 'e might have come t' wind the clocks."

"You bet! Ter do with the babies, I've 'eard."

"Ah, 'ow was that?"

"Murray's man, 'e told me, t'other evening. This little feller be what they call a 'Lonnan Special.' Dunno what edition."

Three pairs of eyes, one member was absent on duty at the pub, followed Major Murray's dog-cart with an all-engrossing stare as its red wheels whirled by in the June sunshine.

"Thought Steel 'ad the managin' of all Murray's badgers."

"So 'e 'as. Didn't yer see 'im come back by the 7.50 t'other day?"

"I did."

"An' the other feller who's bin wearin' Steel's breeches all the month—went off by the 4.49."

"'E did."

"Saucy lookin' chap."

"Give me Jim Murchison and blow the liquor. 'E tells you what's what, and no mistake. Said I sh'ld drink meself to death—and so I shall."

"What, 'ad the roups again, Frank?"

"Yes, all along with my old liver. Chucks it out of me every marnin', reg'lar as clock-work."

The observations of the brotherhood were reliable as far as the identity of the gentleman in Major Murray's dog-cart was concerned. He was named Dr. Peterson, and his caliber may be appreciated by the fact that he received a check for twenty-five guineas when he travelled forty miles to and fro from his house in Mayfair. Moreover, he had left his card the preceding day on Dr. Parker Steel, with a note urging that an interview between them was urgent and inevitable. Parker Steel's face had betrayed exceeding discomfort and alarm on reading the name on the piece of paste-board that Dr. Peterson had left on the general practitioner's hall table.

It was about four o'clock on the afternoon of Thursday when Major Murray's dog-cart clattered over the cobbles of St. Antonia's Square, and deposited a very spruce little man in a well-cut frock-coat, and a blemishless tall hat at Parker Steel's door.

The imperturbable Symons recognized him as the caller of yesterday.

"Dr. Steel's out, sir."

"Out?"

"Very sorry, sir—"

"You gave him my card and note?"

"Certainly, sir. Will you wait? Dr. Steel should be back at any minute."

Dr. Peterson glanced at his watch, and stepped like a dapper little bantam into the hall. His reddish hair was plastered from a broad pathway in the middle, so as to conceal the premature tendency to baldness that his pate betrayed. Dr. Peterson's figure boasted a juvenile waist; his face, smooth and very sleek, almost suggested the craft of the beauty specialist. A red-and-green bandanna handkerchief protruded from his breast coat-pocket, an æsthetic patch of color harmonizing with his sage-green tie. He wore black-and-white check trousers, patent-leather boots, and a tuberose in his button-hole. Moreover, his person smelled fragrantly of scent.

Dr. Peterson deposited his hat and gloves on the hall table.

"I can spare half an hour. My train goes at five. It is highly important that I should see Dr. Steel."

"I will tell him, sir, the minute he returns," and she showed Dr. Peterson into the drawing-room.

A bedroom bell rang as Symons was descending the stairs to the kitchen. She turned with a "Drat the thing!" and dawdled heavenward to her mistress's room.

“Who has called, Symons?”

“Dr. Peterson, ma’am.”

“From Major Murray’s?”

“Yes, ma’am; wants to see the master, most particular.”

“Dr. Steel’s not in?”

“No, ma’am, but he left word that he would be at home about four.”

“Thanks, Symons, you can go.”

The servant’s ill-conditioned stare was bitterness to a woman of Betty’s pride and penetration. The finer touches of courtesy, the more delicate instincts, are rarely developed in the lower classes. Even the starched Symons was utterly cowlike in her manners. Betty felt her face sore under the servant’s eyes.

A big red book lay open upon the dressing-table amid Betty Steel’s crowd of silver knick-knacks. It was the *Medical Directory*, and lay open at the London list, and at the letter P. Dr. Peterson’s name headed the left-hand page, as staff-physician to sundry hospitals and charitable institutions, and as a holder of medals, diplomas, and degrees galore. A cursory glance at the titles of his contributions to medical literature would have marked him out as one of the leading authorities on diseases of the skin.

Betty Steel looked in her pier-glass, fluffed out her hair a little, and fastening the scarf of her green tea-gown, crossed the landing towards the stairs. She had that steady and almost staring expression of the eyes that betrays a purpose suddenly but seriously matured. She had not spoken with her husband since their meeting on the night of his return.

“Dr. Peterson, I believe?”

The specialist had been reviewing the photographs on the mantel-piece, and had displayed his good taste by electing a handsome cousin of Betty’s as his ideal for the moment. He set the silver frame down rather hurriedly, and turned at the sound of the door opening, a dapper, diplomatic, yet rather finicking figure, the figure more of a little man about town than of a brilliant and prosperous London consultant.

“Mrs. Steel—?”

He had glanced up with a slight puckering of the brows into Betty’s face.

“Yes. I am sorry my husband is out. I have taken the opportunity, Dr. Peterson, of consulting you —”

She moved towards the window, graceful, well poised, and unembarrassed. The specialist stood aside, his face a sympathetic blank, a birdlike and inquisitive alertness visible in his eyes.

“You have noticed my face, Dr. Peterson?”

She stood before him unflinchingly, a woman of distinction and of charm of manner despite her great disfigurement. The fingers of Dr. Peterson’s right hand were fidgeting with his watch-chain. It was wholly improper for a London consultant to appear embarrassed.

“You wish to consult me?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated, elevated his eyebrows, and then met her with a conciliatory smile.

“I do not know, Mrs. Steel, whether—”

She understood his meaning and the significance of his hesitation.

“My husband? Yes—Your opinion will be of interest to him. Let us be frank.”

Dr. Peterson advanced one patent-leather boot, put the forefinger of his right hand under Betty’s chin, and turned her face towards the light. She could see that he was profoundly interested despite his air of shallow smartness. Also that he was somewhat perplexed by the responsibility she had thrust upon him.

“Hum! How long have you noticed the swelling on the lip?”

“Five weeks or more, perhaps longer.”

“The throat?”

She opened her mouth wide. Dr. Peterson peered into it and frowned.

“The rash has been present some days?”

“Yes.”

“You are paler than usual?”

“I think so.”

“Feverish?”

“A little.”

“Of course, Dr. Steel has seen all this?”

“Yes.”

“Hum!”

He was embarrassed, troubled, and betrayed the feeling in an increased fussiness and polite magniloquence of manner.

“You must pardon me, Mrs. Steel.”

“I want you to be quite frank with me. I am ready to answer any questions. You may think my attitude unusual—”

“Not at all—not at all,” and he flicked his handkerchief from his pocket and began to polish a lens in a tortoise-shell setting.

“I must confess, Dr. Peterson, that I have been subjected to a great deal of worry and—and doubt. My husband only returned yesterday. Of course, you know about that. Dr. Little sent for you to see Major Murray’s wife, I believe.”

Dr. Peterson still flourished his handkerchief.

“Has Dr. Steel expressed any opinion to you?”

“About this?”

“Yes.”

“He told me that it was a form of eczema.”

The specialist threw a sharp, penetrating look at her face.

"That was your husband's diagnosis?"

"I believe it to be incorrect."

"Indeed!"

"And that he knows that he has not told me the truth."

Both heard the rattle of a latch-key in the lock of the front door, and the sound of footsteps in the hall. Symons could be heard hurrying up the stairs from the kitchen. She spoke to some one in the hall, a tired and toneless voice answering her in curt monosyllables. It was Parker Steel.

Dr. Peterson walked up the room and back again to the window, glancing rather nervously at the clock as he passed. His attitude was that of a man who has been entangled in the meshes of a very delicate dilemma, and he was waiting to see how Betty Steel's mood shaped. She was standing with one hand resting on the back of a chair, as though steadying herself for the inevitable crisis.

"Ah, good-day; I must apologize—Betty!"

He had entered with an elaborate flourish intended to suggest the brisk candor of a man much hurried in the public service. His wife's figure, outlined against the window, brought him to a dead halt on the threshold. The blood seemed to recede from his face in an instant. The alert, confident manner became a tense effort towards naturalness and self-control.

"You will excuse us, Betty. Dr. Peterson and I have matters to discuss."

He held the door open for her, but she did not budge.

"I am consulting Dr. Peterson, Parker."

Her husband's face seemed to grow thin and haggard, with the lights and shadows of the hall for a checkered background. The specialist stood jerking his watch-chain up and down.

"I think," he began—

Betty turned to him with the air of a mistress of a salon.

"This is a family affair, Dr. Peterson, is it not? There are no secrets that a husband and wife cannot share. I may tell my husband what I believe your opinion to be?"

"My opinion, madam!"

His voice betrayed the rising impatience of a man irritated by finding his discretion taxed beyond its strength. The grim touch of the tragic element banished the veneer of formalism from his face. To pose such a man as Dr. Peterson with a problem in ethics, engendered anger and impatience.

"I am not aware that I have pledged myself to any expression of opinion."

"No," and she smiled; "but I can ask you a blunt question, to which 'yes' or 'no' will be inevitable."

The specialist met her eyes, and realized that the subtlety of a woman may make a man's prudence seem ridiculous. He was a rapid thinker, and the complexities of the situation began to shape themselves in his mind. Betty Steel was not a woman whom he would care to hinder with a lie.

"You put me in a most embarrassing position—"

"Believe me, no."

"With regard to another case I have some authority to speak."

"Consider my case within your jurisdiction."

"Betty:" Her husband's face was turned to hers in miserable reproof. "Remember, we are something to each other. I cannot bear—"

He faltered as he read the unalterable purpose in her eyes. It is the nature of some women to appear incapable of pity when their self-love has received a poignant shock.

"Then, Parker, you admit—"

"For God's sake, Betty, let me have five minutes' privacy—"

She looked at him calmly, as though considering his inmost thoughts.

"I think Dr. Peterson can deal with you more forcibly than I can. It is sufficient that we understand each other."

"Have you no consideration for my self-respect?"

"It is my self-respect that accuses you in this."

And she turned and left the two men together.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

It was a wet evening in June, and a steady downrush of rain purred on the tiled roofs of the old town and set the broad eaves and high-peaked gables dripping. A summer sweetness breathed in the gardens where the fallen petals of rhododendrons lay like flame upon the green grass. The roses were weighed down with dew, and each leaf diamonded with a glimmering tear. In Lombard Street the tall cypresses stood like solemn monks cowled and coped against the rain.

The downpour had lessened a little, and Jack Murchison, flattening his nose against the nursery window, saw a country cart driven by a man in a white mackintosh swing into Lombard Street from the silver, rain-drenched sheen of St. Antonia's trees. The man's big white body streamed with wet, his face shining out like a drenched peony under the brim of his hat, that dripped like the flooded gutter of a house. Tremulous rain-drops fell rhythmically from the big man's nose, and the apron that covered his legs was full of puddles.

The country cart drew up outside the doctor's house, and Master Jack saw the big man in the white mackintosh climb out laboriously, the cart tilting under his weight. He threw the leather apron over the horse's loins, and swung the water out of his hat, disclosing to the boy above a round bald patch about the size of a saucer.

The bell rang, a good, rattling, honest peal that told of a straightforward and unaffected fist. Jack heard Mary's rather nasal treble answering the big man's vigorous bass. The white mackintosh was

doffed and hung considerately on the handle of the bell. There was much wiping of boots, while the man Gage appeared at the side gate in the garden wall, and came forward to hold the farmer's horse.

"Sorry to bother you, doctor, on such a beast of an evening."

"Come in, Mr. Carrington."

"You remember me, sir?"

"I don't forget many faces. Come into my study."

The doffing of the white mackintosh had uncovered a robust and rather corpulent, thick-set figure in rough tweed jacket and breeches and box-cloth leggings. The farmer had one of those typically solid English faces, fresh-colored though deeply wrinkled, and chastening its good humor with an alert, world-wise watchfulness in the rather deep-set eyes. Mr. Carrington was considered rather a masterful man by his friends, a man who could laugh while his wits were at work bettering a bargain. He was one of the most prominent farmers in the neighborhood, and one of the few who confessed to making money despite the times.

"My trap's waiting outside, doctor. I want you to come back with me right away to Goldspur Farm."

Mr. Carrington was sitting on the extreme edge of a chair, and wiping the rain from his face with a silk handkerchief.

"Anything much the matter?"

"Well, doctor, you know I have taken to growing a lot of ground-fruit, and I've had about fifty pickers down from town this year."

Murchison nodded.

"They're camped out in two tin shanties and a couple of tents down at Goldspur Farm. East-enders, all of them; and you never quite know, doctor, what an East-ender carries. Well, to be frank, I'm worried about some of 'em."

Mr. Carrington sat squarely in his chair, and tapped the floor with the soles of his boots. He looked thoughtful, and the corners of his big, good-tempered mouth had a melancholy droop.

"There's one woman in particular, doctor, and her youngster, who seem bad. Sick and sweating; won't take food; they just lie there in the straw like logs. My foreman didn't tell me anything about it till this afternoon, but when I'd seen the woman I had the horse put in, and came straight here."

Murchison glanced at his watch, and then crossed the room and rang the bell.

"Can you have me driven back?" he asked.

"Certainly, doctor."

"Good. Ah, Mary, will you ask your mistress to have dinner postponed till eight. And tell Gage to take these letters to the post. Now, Mr. Carrington, my mackintosh and I are at your service."

"You'll need it, doctor, and an old hat."

A slender vein of gold gashed the dull west as they left the outskirts of the town behind. As the rent in the sky broadened, long rays of light came down the valley, making the woods and meadows a glory of shimmering green, and firing the rain pools so that they shone like brass. The farmer took the private road that ran through Ulverstone Park, a rolling wilderness of beeches and Scotch firs, whose green "rides" plunged into the glimmering rain-splashed umbrage of tall trees. Here were tangled banks of purpling heather, and great stretches of sweet woodland turf. Old yews brooded in the deeps of the domain, solemn and still, most ancient and wise of trees.

"Get up, Molly," and Mr. Carrington shook a raindrop from his nose, and flicked the brown mare with the whip. "Clearing a little. Sorry for the people who cut their hay yesterday."

"Somewhat damp. How is the fruit doing?"

"Oh, pretty fair, pretty fair, as far as our strawberries are concerned. The finest year, doctor, is when you have a first-class crop and your neighbors can only put up rubbish. It's no good every one being in tip-top form. I've got rid of tons, and at no dirt price, either."

Mr. Carrington's British face beamed slyly above his angelic white mackintosh. It was a face in which stolid satisfaction and stolid woe were easily interchanged, for the heavy lines thereof could be twisted into either expression.

Murchison was listening to the hoarse rattle of the clearing shower beating upon a myriad leaves. The gold band in the west was broadening into a canopy of splendor. Had Mr. Carrington been educated up to more pushing and aggressive methods of making money, he would have seen in that sky nothing but a magnificent background for some silhouetted sky-sign shouting "Try Our Jam."

"And these pickers of yours, how long have they been with you?"

The lines in the farmer's face rearranged themselves abruptly.

"Poor devils, they look on this as a sort of yearly picnic, doctor. There are about fifty of them, and they've been at Goldspur about ten days."

"Many children?"

"Children? Plenty. If they were Irish, they'd bring the family pig out, doctor, just to give him some new sort of dirt to wallow in. But then, what can you expect—what can you expect?"

They had left the park by the western lodge, and came out upon a stretch of undulating fields closed in the near distance by woods of oak and beech. A tall, gabled farm-house of red brick rose outlined against the sky with a great fir topping its chimney-stacks like the flat cloud seen above a volcano in full eruption. Near it, fronting the road, were a few nondescript cottages; farther still a jumble of barns, outhouses, and stables. In the middle of a fourteen-acre field Murchison could see two zinc-roofed sheds and a couple of old military tents standing isolated in a waste of sodden, dreary soil.

Mr. Carrington pointed to them with his whip.

"There's the colony. Will you come in first, doctor, and have—" he reconsidered the words and cleared his throat—"and have—a cup of tea?"

Murchison had noticed the break in the invitation, and had reddened.

“No, thanks. We had better walk, I suppose?”

“Sit light, doctor; we have a sort of road, though it ain’t exactly Roman.”

The farmer passed Murchison the reins, and climbed down, the trap swaying like a small boat anchored in a swell. He opened a gate leading into the field, his white mackintosh flapping about his legs.

“Not worth while getting up again,” he said, laconically. “Drive her on, doctor, I’ll follow.”

Murchison heard the click of the gate, and the squelch of Mr. Carrington’s boots in the mud, as the trap bumped at a walking pace towards the zinc sheds in the field. The larger of the two resembled a coach-house, and could be closed at one end by two swinging doors. The rain was still rattling on the roof as Murchison drove up, and a thin swirl of smoke drifted out sluggishly from the darkness of the interior. The two tents had a soaked and slatternly appearance. Empty bottles, old tins, scraps of dirty paper, and miscellaneous rubbish littered the ground. On a line slung between two chestnut poles three dirty towels were hanging, either to wash or to dry?

As the trap stopped at the end of the rough road, Murchison could see that the larger shed was like a big hutch full of live things crowded together. A litter of straw, ankle deep, lay round the walls. A fire burned in the middle of the earth floor. The faces that were lit up by the light from the fire were coarse, quick-eyed, and hungry, the faces seen in London slums.

Half a dozen children scuttled out like a litter of young pigs, and stood in the slush and rain, staring at the trap. Murchison’s appearance on the scene seemed to arouse no stir of interest among the adult dwellers in the shed. They stared, that was all, one or two breaking the silence with crude and characteristic brevity.

“’Ello, ’ere’s the b——y doctor.”

“There’s ’air!”

“Look at the hold boss, with a phiz like a round o’ raw beef stuck hon top of a sack of flour.”

Mr. Carrington arrived with his boots muddy and the lines of his face emphatic and authoritative.

“Some one hold the mare. Why don’t you keep the kids in out of the wet? This way, doctor, the second tent.”

Mr. Carrington opened the flap, and, letting Murchison enter, contented himself with staring hard at two figures lying on an old flock mattress with a coat rolled up for a pillow. One was a woman, thin, still pretty, in a hollow-cheeked, hectic way, with a ragged blouse open at the throat, and a couple of sacks covering her. The other was a child, a girl with flaxen hair tossed about a flushed and feverish face. The child seemed asleep, with half an orange, sucked to the pulp, clutched by her grimy fingers.

Murchison remained for perhaps half an hour in that rain-soaked tent, while Mr. Carrington stumped up and down impatiently, kicking the mud from his boots and eying the rubbish that marked the presence of these London poor. The eastern sky was filling fast with the oblivion of night when Murchison emerged. The woman had been able to answer his questions in a dazed and apathetic way.

Mr. Carrington met him with a squaring of his sturdy shoulders and a bluff uplift of the chin.

“Well, doctor?”

“I’m glad you sent for me.”

“As bad as that, is it?”

“Typhoid, or I am much mistaken.”

The farmer thrust his hands into the side pockets of his mackintosh, and flapped them to and fro.

“Well, I’m damned!” was all he said.

The cold sky rose dusted with a few stars in the west when the farmer’s cart set Murchison down in Lombard Street before his own door. Dinner had been waiting more than an hour. Catherine’s face, bright, yet a little troubled, met him in the shaded glow of the hall.

“You must be soaked to the skin, dear,” and she felt his clothes.

“No, nothing much. I’m more hungry than wet.”

“A long case. Dinner is ready.”

They went into the dining-room together, Murchison’s arm about her body.

“Some responsibility for me at last,” he said, quietly; “I believe it is typhoid.”

“Where, at Goldspur Farm?”

“Yes, among Carrington’s pickers.”

“Poor things!”

“They are cooped up like cattle in a shed.”

He was silent for some minutes, for Mary had set a plateful of hot soup before him, and even doctors are sufficiently human to enjoy food.

“There is a child ill,” he said, staring at the bowl of roses in the middle of the table.

“Poor little thing!”

“Strange, Kate, but she reminds me—wonderfully, very wonderfully—of Gwen.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

It was on the second morning following his interview with Dr. Peterson that Parker Steel received two letters, heralding the shadow of an approaching storm.

> “I have laid the facts of the case,” wrote the demi-god from Mayfair, “before the General Medical Council. I consider this action of mine to partake of the nature of a public duty; for your abuse of your position has been too gross even for medical etiquette to cover. I cannot understand how a practitioner of your reputation could be so mad as to run so scandalous a

risk. That you contracted the disease innocently in the pursuit of duty would have won you the sympathy of your fellow-practitioners. Your concealment of the disease puts an immoral complexion on the case. . . . Needless to say, I have given Major Murray the full benefit of an honest opinion."

Such a letter from a physician of Dr. Peterson's standing would have been sufficient in itself to demoralize a man of more courage and tenacity than Parker Steel. The curt declaration of war that reached him from Major Murray, by the very same post, exaggerated the effect that the specialist's letter had produced.

"SIR,—I have received from Dr. Peterson a statement that convicts you of the most scandalous mal praxis. Needless to say, I am placing the matter in the hands of my solicitor; I consider it to be a case deserving of publicity, however repugnant the atmosphere surrounding the affair may be to me and mine.

"MURRAY."

Those who have touched the realities of war will tell you that they have seen men with faces pinched as by a frost, their teeth chattering like castanets, even under the blaze of an African sun. It was at the breakfast-table that Parker Steel read those two ominous letters. The man looked ill and yellow, and his nerves were none too steady, to judge by the way he had gashed himself in shaving. The very clothes he wore seemed to have grown creased and shabby in a week, as though they felt the wearer's figure limp and shrunken, and had lost tone in consequence.

It may be remembered that the Immortal Three displayed varying symptoms when at grips with death. The tongue of Ortheris waxed feverishly profane; the Yorkshireman broke out into song; Mulvaney, the Paddy, was incontinently sick. Parker Steel emulated the Irishman in this eccentricity that morning, save that his nausea was inspired by panic, and not by heroic rage.

Shaken and very miserable, he sat down at the bureau in his consulting-room, leaned his head upon his hands, and shivered. For two nights he had had but short snatches of sleep, brief lapses into oblivion that had been rendered vain by dreams. The imminent dread of a hundred ignominies had held him sick and cold through the short darkness of the summer nights. Dawn had come and found him feverish and very weary. To a coward it is torture to be alone with his own thoughts.

The third night he had taken sulphonal, a full dose, and had slept till Symons knocked at his bedroom door. The fog of the drug still clung about his brain as he sat at the bureau and tried to think. He seemed incapable of putting any purpose into motion, like an exhausted battery whose cells have been drained of their electric charge.

Parker Steel picked up a pen after he had crouched there silently for some twenty minutes. He opened a drawer, drew out several sheets of note-paper, and began to scribble confused, jerky sentences, to alter, to reconsider, and to erase. The power to determine and to act, even on paper, were lost to him that morning. He wrote two letters, only to tear them up and scatter the pieces in the grate, where a lighted match set them burning. He was still on his knees, turning over the charred fragments, when the door-bell rang.

The sedate Symons came to announce a patient.

"Mrs. Prosser, sir."

"Tell her I can't see her."

Symons stared. Her master had something of the air of an angry dog.

"Tell her I'm busy. She can call again."

"Yes, sir."

She still stood in the doorway, irresolute, surprised.

"What the devil are you waiting there for, Symons?"

"Nothing, sir."

And she withdrew, with her dignity balanced on the tip of a very much tilted nose.

Parker Steel opened the window wide, and leaning his hands on the sill, looked out into the garden. It was air that he needed—air amid the stifling complexities of life that were crowding tumultuous upon his future. The garden with the sumptuous serenity of its trees and flowers had no sympathetic touch for him in his agony of isolation. It was his loneliness that weighed upon him heavily at that moment. He had outlawed himself, as it were, from the heart of his own wife. The very house was a pest-house in which two stricken souls were sundered and held apart.

If Betty would only see him. If she could only bring herself to understand that he had acted this disastrous part in order to retain the social satisfactions that she loved. Any companionship, even the companionship of a half-estranged wife, seemed preferable to the isolation that he felt deepening about him. He argued that it was his realization of Betty's ambition that had made him dissemble for her sake. Any argument, however suspicious, is pressed into the service of a man whose whole desire is to justify himself.

Unfortunately, when a woman's trust has been once shocked from its foundations, no buttressing and underpinning can save that superstructure of sentiment that has taken years to build. Betty had kept to her room with no one but Madge Ellison to give her sympathy and advice. The husband had always found the friend embarrassing with her presence any *rapprochement* between him and his wife.

As he stood at the open window, with the words of the two letters he had read weaving a hopeless tangle of bewilderment in his brain, he heard some one descend the stairs and go out by the front door into the square. Parker Steel realized that this ubiquitous and embarrassing friend had left Betty alone in the room above. There was some chance at last of his seeing her alone, and of attempting to break down the barrier of her reserve.

He climbed the stairs slowly, and stood listening for several seconds on the landing before turning the handle of his wife's door. The door was locked.

Parker Steel frowned over the ineptitude of the manœuvre. A dramatic entry might at least have given some dignity to the trick. As it was, he felt like a sneaking boy who had been balked and taken in some none too honorable artifice.

"Betty."

"Yes, what is it?"

She was in a chair near the window, reading, with her dark hair spread upon her shoulders. Her mouth hardened as she recognized her husband's voice. It was the very day, and she remembered it, the day of Lady Sophia's fashionable bazaar when Betty Steel had foreseen the people of Roxton at her feet. She had asked Madge Ellison to bring out the dress that she should have worn. Primrose and leaf-green, it hung across the foot-rail of her bed.

"I want to speak to you, Betty."

"Is there anything that we can discuss?"

The level tenor of her voice, its unflurried callousness, gave him an impression of obstinate estrangement.

"Betty."

She did not answer.

"Let me in. If you will only give me a chance to justify myself—"

The very words he chose were the words least calculated to move a woman. Betty, lying back in her chair, pictured to herself a cringing, deprecating figure that could boast none of the passionate forcefulness of manhood. A woman may be won by courage and strength, even in the person of the man who has done her wrong; but let her have the repulsion of contempt, and her instinct towards forgiveness will be frozen into an unbending pride.

"I do not wish you to make excuses, Parker."

"But, Betty—"

"Well?"

"It was for the sake of the home, the practice, everything. Can't you understand? Can't you imagine what I have gone through?"

Her momentary silence seemed to suggest a sneer.

"So you would justify a lie?"

"Betty, don't talk like this. I am worried to death by other matters as it is."

"I can understand that perfectly."

He began to pace the landing, halting irresolutely from time to time before the locked door.

"I have heard from Peterson this morning."

No reply.

"He is reporting the matter to the General Council, and he has given the truth away to Murray. You know what that must mean."

Still no reply.

"Betty."

Had he been able to see the cynical smile upon her face, Parker Steel might have understood that by acting the suppliant for her pity he only intensified her contempt.

"Betty, is this fair to me?"

He shook the door with a sudden gust of petulant impatience.

"Show me some little consideration. I have some right to demand—"

"Demand what you please, Parker, but oblige me by not making so much noise."

"You will regret this."

His voice was harsh now and beyond control.

"I have regretted much already."

"Your marriage, I suppose?"

"There is no need, Parker, to indulge in details."

"This is beyond my patience!"

"And mine, I assure you."

He turned, and retreated from the attack at the same moment that Madge Ellison reappeared upon the stairs. They passed each other without a word; the woman, clear-eyed and uncompromising; the man gliding close to the wall. Madge Ellison found Betty sitting with closed eyes before the open window, the June sunshine dappling the bosoms of the tall trees in the square with gold.

CHAPTER XL

The month was August, and August at its worst, a month of glare and dust, and an atmosphere more trying to the temper than all the insolent bluster of a bragging March.

Mr. Carrington, in his shirt sleeves, and white linen sun-hat crammed down over his eyes, stood under the acacia-tree at his garden gate, chatting to the Reverend Peter Burt, Curate of Cossington, who had tramped three miles to visit some of the sick people on the farm. Mr. Burt was rather a shy little man, very much in earnest, and very much convinced of the responsibility of his position.

"All this must have been a great worry to you," said the clergyman, with a comprehensive sweep of an oak stick.

"Worry—don't talk of it, sir. What with the heat, and the Medical Officer of Health, and the Sanitary Inspector, I've been pretty near crazy. I don't know what I should have done, Mr. Burt, but for Murchison and his good lady."

"Mrs. Murchison seems to have been a local Florence Nightingale."

Mr. Carrington stared.

"I don't happen to know the woman's name," he said; "but she must have been a good 'un, Mr.

Burt, to be showed in the same class as the doctor's lady. Why—" and the farmer withdrew his hands from his pockets and tapped his left palm with his right forefinger—"why, d'you know what she did when she'd been over here and seen how we were fixed?"

Mr. Carrington paused expressively, and looked the young clergyman in the face, as though defying him to conceive the nature of this unique woman's genius.

"No, I have not heard."

"Well, Mr. Burt, there's religion and there's religion; some of us wear black coats on a Sunday and put silver in the plate; some of us aren't so regular and respectable, but we play the game, and that's more than many of your sitting pew-hens do. Excuse me, sir, I'm rather rough in the tongue. Well, Mrs. Murchison, she doesn't strike you as a district visiting sort of lady to look at; she's got a fine face and a head of hair, like the Countess of Camber, who gave the prizes away at our Agricultural Show last season. Well, Mr. Burt, she came over here, and saw what sort of a fix we were in, two grumbling nurses, and not much more than straw and sacking. Well, what does she do but take one of my wagons and my men and go off to Roxton all on her own."

Mr. Carrington paused for breath, took off his sun-hat and wiped his forehead with it, his eyes remaining fixed emphatically on the Curate's face.

"And what d'you think, sir? Back came that wagon of mine loaded up with linen, and basins, and crockery, a bed or two, and God knows what. She'd ransacked her own house, sir, and gone round to all the neighbors begging like a papist. Get the stuff? She did that. Not easy to say no to a woman with a face and a voice like hers. Carmagee joined in, and Canon Stensly, and a good score more. And dang my soul, Mr. Burt, she'd been working with her husband here, day in, day out; and that's the sort of thing, sir, that I call religion."

The Curate began to look vaguely uncomfortable under the farmer's concentrated methods of address. It took much to move Mr. Carrington to words, but when once moved, the result resembled the eruption of a long quiescent volcano, the vigor of the eruption corresponding roughly to the length of the period of quiescence.

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Carrington," he said, with a certain boyish stiffness, as though he considered it superfluous for the farmer to condemn his soul to perdition.

"You must excuse my language, Mr. Burt; when I get worked up over a subject I must let fly. And it's these dirty lies that have been flying abroad about this good lady's husband that have made me hot, sir, to see justice done."

Mr. Burt appeared interested by the windows of the house that glimmered from amid a mass of creepers like water shining through the foliage of trees.

"One hears very curious rumors," he acknowledged, with a discreet frown.

"I suppose you've heard them over at Cossington?"

"Well, I have heard reports."

"About our doctor here and the drink?"

Mr. Burt nodded.

"But I don't think anyone believed them," he confessed.

The farmer's right forefinger began to tap his left palm again.

"Look here, sir, I ought to know something about Dr. Murchison's character, I imagine. The man's been here nearly a month, living in my house, and working like a Trojan. We've had nearly sixty cases, what with the pickers and our own people. You haven't seen what the doctor's been through in this little epidemic of ours, Mr. Burt, and I have. You get to the bottom of a man's nature when he's working eighteen hours out of the twenty-four, doing the nurse's jobs as well as his own, and feeding some of the kids with his own hands. I've seen him come into my parlor, sir, at night, and go slap off to sleep on the sofa, he was that done. And never, not on one single blessed occasion, have I seen that man show the white feather or touch a drop of drink!"

Mr. Burt appeared to become more and more embarrassed by being stared at vehemently in the face, as the farmer's right fist smacked the points of his argument into his left palm. He had to return Mr. Carrington's stare, eye to eye, as a pledge of sincerity. He began to fidget, to scan the horizon, and to fumble with his watch-chain.

"Your evidence sounds conclusive," he said; "I think it is time I—"

Mr. Carrington ignored the little man's restiveness, and came and stood outside the gate.

"Now, I make it a rule in life, Mr. Burt, to take people just as I find 'em, and not to listen to what all the old women say. The rule of a practical man, you understand. Now—"

The Curate cast a flurried glance up the road, and pulled out his watch.

"You must really excuse me, Mr. Carrington."

"In a hurry, are you? Well, I was only going to say that some of us people have come by a shrewd notion how all this chaff got chucked about in these parts. Murchison was a first-class man, and some people got jealous of him, and played a low-down game to get him out of the town. You take my meaning, Mr. Burt?"

"Yes, certainly. Good Heavens, it is nearly twelve. I must really say good-bye, Mr. Carrington; I hope—"

"One moment, sir. I won't mention any name, but perhaps you are just as wise as I am. And what's more, Mr. Burt, from what I've heard, that gentleman that we know of has just been treated as he tried to treat a better man than himself. It was his wife, they say—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Carrington, but some one is calling you, I think."

"They can wait. Now—"

"To be frank with you, Mr. Carrington, I can't."

"Oh, well, sir, if you are in such a hurry, I'll postpone my remarks. I was only going to say—"

But Mr. Burt gave him a wave of the hand, and fled.

A girl of seventeen came down the path from the house, between the standard roses, her black hair already gathered up tentatively at the back of a brown neck, and the smartness of her blouse and collar betraying the fact that she considered herself a mature and very eligible woman.

“Dad, are you deaf?”

Mr. Carrington turned with the leisurely composure of a father.

“What’s all this noise about, Nan?”

“I’ve been calling you for five minutes. They’re all there—in the fourteen-acre.”

“Who?”

“Why, Mrs. Murchison and the Canon, and old Lady Gillingham, and half a dozen more. Dr. Murchison sent one of the boys over for you.”

Mr. Carrington began to hustle.

“Dang it, I expected them to-morrow!”

“What a man you are, dad!” and she stood like an armed angel of scorn in the middle of the path; “you can’t go and see them in your shirt-sleeves.”

“Bless my soul, Nan, where’s my coat?”

“On the fence. You were talking to Mr. Burt long enough to forget it. Why didn’t you bring him in?”

Mr. Carrington was struggling into his alpaca coat, his daughter watching his contortions with the superior serenity of seventeen.

“Bring who in?”

“Mr. Burt.”

“The little man’s as shy as a calf.”

“Perhaps you talked him silly.”

“Look here, my dear, it’s too hot to argue. Is my tie proper?”

His daughter regarded him with critical candor.

“It will do,” she answered, resignedly, as though her father’s ties were beyond all promise of salvation.

The camp of the fruit-pickers in Mr. Carrington’s fourteen-acre stood out like a field-hospital under the August sun. There were half a dozen white tents pitched near the two sheds, and on an ingenious frame-work of poles an awning had been spread so that convalescents could be brought out to lie in the shade, and gain the maximum amount of air. The whole place looked trim and clean, and a faint perfume of some coal-tar disinfectant permeated the air.

Mr. Carrington, as he emerged from the orchard gate, saw quite a representative gathering moving through the camp. Several of the Roxton celebrities who had subscribed to the relief fund, had been invited by Porteus Carmagee, the treasurer, to drive over and see how the money had been spent. The farmer recognized Lady Gillingham’s carriage and pair waiting in the roadway beyond the white field-gate. The Canon’s landau had drawn up deferentially behind it, while Mrs. Murchison’s pony, that drew her governess car, was being held by one of the pickers who had lost two children but a week ago.

Lady Sophia appeared to be holding quite a state inspection, for she had Murchison in his white linen jacket at one elbow, and the Canon in his black coat at the other. She was making considerable use of her lorgnette—a very affable, commonplace, and well-meaning great lady, who felt it to be a most Christian condescension on her part to drive out and examine this temporary hospital and its London poor. Catherine Murchison and Mrs. Stensly were talking to one of the women lying under the awning. The treasurer had remained judiciously in the background, and was snapping away to three Roxton ladies who appeared to be fascinated by some subject foreign to enteric fever and pickers of fruit.

Porteus Carmagee looked very much amused. A thin little lady in a hat far too big for her, giving her an indistinct resemblance to a mushroom, was attempting to draw more definite information from the lawyer by the feminine pretence of unbelief.

“But are you sure, Mr. Carmagee? It may only be a rumor; one hears so many extraordinary things.”

“I am perfectly sure, madam. There are facts, however, that cannot well be discussed.”

The suggestion of mystery lent a double glamour to Porteus Carmagee’s information.

“Then he has left the town for good?”

“I think I may swear to that as a fact.”

“And alone?”

“Quite alone.”

“But surely his wife—?”

Mr. Carmagee tightened up his mouth and stared reflectively into space.

“Don’t ask me to unravel the complexities of other people’s households, Mrs. Blount.”

“But how extraordinary! Of course everyone knows that she is ill.”

“Every one knows a great deal more of one’s private affairs, madam, than one knows one’s self.”

The three ladies exchanged glances; they formed three spokes of curiosity, with Mr. Carmagee for the hub.

“And no one has seen Betty Steel for some weeks.”

“That is so.”

“And it is rumored—”

“Then you have heard that too?”

“What, my dear?”

“That it is an affection of the skin.”

The lawyer extricated himself from the group, and moved to where Catherine’s golden head shone Madonna-like over the face of a little child.

“Affection of tom-cats,” quoth he, under his breath; “it is curious the way these women play with a piece of scandal like a cat with a mouse. It mustn’t die, or half the zest of the game would be gone. Catherine, my friend, you are different from the rest.”

During these digressions Mr. Carrington had brought himself within the ken of Lady Gillingham’s lorgnette. It appeared to the farmer that the great lady’s eyes were fixed critically

upon his tie. His right shoulder blushed as he remembered that there was a three-inch rent there in the seam of his alpaca coat. Such is the judgment that overtakes those who are mistaken as to dates.

"Good-morning, Mr.—Mr. Carrington. We are admiring how beautifully you have managed everything for these poor people. So clean, and so—so airy. I am sure you must have suffered a great deal of inconvenience and worry."

Mr. Carrington blushed. Porteus Carmagee, who was watching the drama from a distance, felt for Mr. Carrington a species of ironical pity. The farmer's boots described an angle of ninety degrees with one another, and the vehement smirk upon his face made the redness thereof seem dangerously sultry.

"We have all been so interested, Mr. Carrington—"

"Very good of your ladyship, I'm sure."

"I sent you an iron bedstead, you may remember. I hope it has been of use."

"Great use, your ladyship."

"Ah, that is right; and is your family quite well, Mr. Carrington? I hope none of you have contracted the disease?"

"Only my youngest boy, your ladyship, but Dr. Murchison soon had him in hand."

"Ah, quite so; good-day, Mr. Carrington," and she relieved him from the splendor of her notice, and turned to Murchison, who was waiting at her elbow.

"What a noble profession, the physician's, Dr. Murchison!"

The big, brown-faced man smiled, and his eyes wandered unconsciously in the direction of his wife.

"It has its responsibilities," he said, "and also its compensations."

Lady Sophia waved her lorgnette to and fro, and beamed to the extent of the five-guinea check she had contributed to the relief fund. She was wondering whether it was possible that this quiet, clear-eyed man could ever have been the victim of such a thing as drink. If so—then he was to be pitied, and not abused.

"It must be so gratifying, Dr. Murchison, to save the life of a fellow-being."

"Yes, it is something to be grateful for."

"How well your wife looks! I hear she has been working here, like any trained nurse."

Catherine, dancing a doll before the thin little hands of a child of four, was serenely oblivious of the great lady's praise. Porteus Carmagee was watching her, smiling, and rattling his keys in his pocket.

"Your wife is very fond of children, Dr. Murchison."

He looked into the distance, and then at the laughing girl of four.

"She lost a child, and that means much to a woman."

"Ah, of course, undoubtedly. Poor little creature!" and her ladyship tended benignly in the direction of the awning.

Canon Stensly and Murchison were left alone together by one of the tents. A man was delirious within it, and they could hear the meaningless patter of fever flowing in one monotonous tone.

"A doctor's life is no sinecure," and he stroked his firm round chin.

"No, perhaps no. We walk daily at the edge of a precipice. And yet it has great compensations."

They were silent a moment, watching Lady Sophia trying to coquet with a rather overpowered child.

"You have heard about Steel?"

"Yes, my wife told me."

"One of those strange fatalities we meet with in life. And yet I think there was something of the nature of a judgment in it."

"Possibly. I am sorry for the woman."

"Then you are magnanimous."

"No, I have learned the true values of life. When one has suffered—"

"One loses the meaner impulses?"

"That is so."

"And remains thankful for what one has?"

"For what one has."

And Murchison's eyes were smiling towards his wife.

CHAPTER XLI

Betty Steel sat alone at the open window of her room one evening as the sun went down over the red roofs of the old town. Lying back in her chair, with her head on a cushion of yellow silk, she could see nothing of the life in the square below, but only the tops of the elm-trees, the black spire of the church, and an infinite expanse of cloud-barred sky. The west stood one great splendor of scarlet and of gold. Above, at the zenith, the clouds were bathed in a radiance of auriferous rose. A cold chalcedony blue held the eastern arch, where the purple rim of the night merged into the amethystine shadows of the woodland hills.

Betty Steel was alone, save for the cat Mignon, curled up asleep in her mistress's lap. Half covering the cat was a crumpled letter, a letter that had been read and reread by eyes that were blind to the pageant of the summer sky. She stirred now and again in her chair, and shivered. The evening seemed cold to her despite all this chaos of color, this kindling of the torches of the west. The house, too, had an empty silence, like a lonely house where death had been and set a seal upon its lips.

Betty lifted Mignon from her lap, rose, crossed the room, and rang the bell. She took a crimson

opera-cloak from a wardrobe in the corner, flung it across her shoulders, and returned to her chair, with the crumpled letter still in her hand.

"Yes, ma'am."

A white cap and apron were framed by the shadows of the landing.

"Is Miss Ellison back yet, Symons?"

"No, ma'am. She said—"

"Listen! Isn't that the front door?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will you ask her to come to me here?"

The white cap and apron vanished into the shadows. Betty, lying back in her chair, looked vacantly at the paling sky, with the blood-red cloak deepening the darkness of her hair. The cat Mignon sprang into her lap. Dreamily, and as by habit, she began to stroke the cat, while listening to the murmur of the two voices in the hall below.

Brisk footsteps ascended the stairs, with the swish of silk, and the soft sighing of a woman's breath.

"Here I am, dear, at last."

"Shut the door, Madge."

"I missed my train. You must have wondered what had happened."

"I have ceased to wonder at anything in life."

Madge Ellison looked curiously at Betty lying back in her chair, and crossed the room slowly, unbuttoning her gloves.

"You sound rather down, dear. What's that? Have you heard—?"

Betty Steel's hand closed spasmodically upon the crumpled letter that she held. Her face was hard and reflective in its outlines. And yet in the eyes there was a pathos of unrest, the unrest of a woman whose gods have left her utterly alone.

"I have heard from Parker."

Madge Ellison threw her gloves on the bed, unpinned her hat, and waited.

"He is leaving England."

"Leaving England?"

"Yes, for the Cape."

"And you?"

"My own mistress to do everything—anything that I please."

She gave a curious little laugh, and began straightening out the letter on her knee, looking at it with eyes that strove to make cynicism cover the wounded instincts of her womanhood.

"Of course—he does not care. He was afraid to face things."

"The coward!"

Madge Ellison bent over her, and laid one hand along her cheek.

"And he has left you here?"

"I suppose he thought there was nothing else to do. He says—" and she still smoothed the creased letter under her hand—"you have your own money to live on. The practice is worth nothing under the circumstances. I should advise you to let the house. You cannot afford to live in it on two hundred pounds a year."

"Is that all you have?"

"My father left it me."

"Wise father!"

"I never thought, Madge, I should value two hundred pounds so much."

Mignon, who still possessed some of the kittenish spirit of her youth, rolled over in Betty's lap, and began to clutch at the letter with her paws. There was something pathetic in the way the wife suffered that scrap of paper to be a plaything for her pet.

"Then he says nothing, dear—?"

"Nothing?"

"About your joining him?"

Betty's lips curled into a cynical smile.

"Why should he?"

"But, surely—"

"It was I who broke the ties between us. I think I hated him. He had so little—so little manliness and strength."

Madge Ellison lifted up her face to the fading sky. She was serious for one occasion in her life, a woman touched by the realism of life's tragedies.

"Can you never—?"

"Don't ask me that, Madge."

"You will be well, soon, your old self. It is only temporary."

"I know."

"Then—"

"If it were only skin deep; but it is deeper, deep to the heart."

The confidante gave a sad shrug of her shapely shoulders.

"Don't say that yet," she said; "you might repent of it."

"You think so?"

"I don't know what to think."

The sky had darkened; the clouds had cast their cloaks of fire, and in the west one broad band of crimson and of gold held back the banners of the approaching night. From St. Antonia's steeple came the chiming of the hour, slow, solemn tones that filled the silence with mysterious eddies of lingering sound.

Madge Ellison was still leaning over Betty's chair, her hands touching her friend's face.

"Try not to brood too much on it, dear. I know I am not much of a woman to give advice. You

might say that I had no experience."

"And I too much! Listen," and she straightened in her chair, "can't you hear people shouting?"

"Shouting?"

"Yes; as though there were a fire. It seems to come from Castle Gate."

They were both silent, listening, and leaning towards the open window. Vague, scattered cries rose from the shadowiness of the darkening town. They seemed to be drawing from Castle Gate towards the square, a low flux of sound that rose and fell like the cadence of the sea upon a shore at night.

Betty sank back in her chair with a glimmer of impatience on her face.

"Of course—I remember."

From under the arch of the old gate-house a crowd of small boys came scattering into the far corner of the square. A number of men followed, lined along a couple of stout ropes. They were dragging a carriage over the gray cobbles and under the dark elms in the direction of Lombard Street.

Madge Ellison drew back from the window. Not so Betty. She rose from her chair, and stood looking down upon those rough men of the Roxton lanes who were shouting and waving caps with the unsophisticated and exhilarating zest of children.

The carriage with its plebeian team passed under Betty's window. In it were a man and a woman, the woman holding a boy upon her knees.

Whether some subtle thought-wave passed between those two or not, it happened that Catherine looked up and saw the face at the open window overhead. It seemed to her in the hurly-burly of this little triumph, that the face above looked down at her out of a gloom of loneliness and humiliation. A sudden cry of womanly pity sounded in her heart. Catherine's arms tightened unconsciously about her boy, and her eyes, that had been smiling, grew thoughtful and very sad.

The carriage rounded the corner and disappeared into Lombard Street, with a small crowd of men, women, and children following in its wake. Betty Steel turned from the window with a laugh.

"It reminds one of a political demonstration."

Madge Ellison had picked up the letter that the wife had left forgotten on the floor.

"Shall I shut the window, Betty?"

"No, it amuses me; cela va sans dire."

The men at the ropes had trundled the carriage down Lombard Street, and brought to before the great house opposite the cypress-trees in Porteus Carmagee's garden. They were very hot and very happy, these Roxton workers, with Mr. William Bains, a stentorian choragus to the crew. A child threw a bunch of flowers into Catherine's lap.

"Hooray! three cheers for the doctor!"

"Hooray! hooray! hooray!"

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Hyphenation and archaic spellings have been retained as in the original. Punctuation and type-setting errors have been corrected without note.

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