

DOCTOR AND PATIENT



HE doctor sat at the bedside of his old friend, now his patient, who was dying, inevitably dying. Accustomed as he was to the presence of death, this passing away of a man to whom he was bound by the tie of a thousand common associations added a freshness to its aspect, to its profound mysteries, its terrors. He was inexpressibly sorry. Still, at this critical moment, with the pale image of the invalid before him, while breathing the atmosphere of the sick room, his thoughts were remote from the bedside; he was preoccupied by another grief.

The patient had realized his fate, he knew that he was on the point of dying, that the thing was inevitable, and he was reconciled. He waited on the threshold of death, calmly, without fear; he seemed to feel the gradual absorption of his soul into the unknown, to be conscious of a gradual effacement, and the sensation filled him only with a benign curiosity.

With the quickened sensitiveness of an invalid the sick man understood that his companion at his bedside was troubled, his good friend who had nursed him with so eager a devotion; and at first he thought, and the thought occasioned him a tranquil, warming sense of gratitude, that it was the contemplation of the slender link which held him to life that was the cause. But a little later, with still quicker intuition, he divined that the trouble had its origin in another source, that he himself was not concerned in it. The comprehension of this did not embitter his mind nor diminish its tranquillity; he was, indeed, this dying man, sorry for the man of life, for the man of robust health, sorry that he should be in some unknown pain.

"What is the matter with you, Philip? Something has not gone well with you; something is bothering you," he said at last.

The doctor took his hand and caressed it quietly. "Are you not ill my friend?" he said.

"Yes, yes; but it is not that. There is something else. Tell me. You will not withdraw your confidence from me now? Come: let me know. You

have done your best for me; perhaps—who knows!—I may be of some use to you.”

“Will it be more effectual?” the doctor said rather bitterly.

“Nonsense! You would have saved me, if you could. It was taken out of your hands. With you it is different. Physical ills, believe me, are alone incurable; and are not you a miracle of health?”

Still the doctor hesitated.

“You would do something for me?” the patient went on.

“I would give my life for yours, you know.”

“Then give me your life, your heart, your full confidence. Give yourself to me now, old friend, as we have always given ourselves to each other, unreservedly, without restraint, without evasion. For taking us together, you and I have been, as men go, tolerably frank towards each other, have we not? We have not concealed from each other our little introspective perplexities, our trivial vanities, our scarcely trivial meannesses. Ours has been a very true comradeship. Let me feel, while all things are slipping away from me, that it still exists; that you have not already come to regard me as a thing apart; come, let me carry the memory of it away—away with me.”

“Very well, then, I shall tell you Frank! Yes, we have been rarely open with each other! Yet, there are many things, the joy and misery of which at once is, that they are unrevealed and unrevealable.”

“Am I at last, at this stage, only becoming to know you?”

The doctor pressed his hand gently. “And it is more difficult than ever to tell you now,” he said. He got up and walked noiselessly about the room. “You know, at least, that I have not been a loose-living man,” he said hesitatingly, as if he were formulating a justification, “that I have certain ideas, that my vagaries have never at any time been excessive, and that even they have ceased these fourteen years or so, since my marriage. Before then, before my marriage—well, was I not wild, inconsiderate of others, indiscreet! But one, after all, has a tender memory for these precious escapades of youth, for these gay irresponsible love episodes, of sometimes so melancholy an ending In one instance, I am not sure that I was entirely to blame. I loved the creature ardently enough at the time.” Something which he observed in the face of the ill man made him hesitate. “But how can I talk to you of these matters, of love, when——”

“When death is knocking at my door. Pray continue. Even I, who am too weak to lift my hand, can feel the strength of love, realize its imperishable power.”

"Even you who have never loved."

Even I who have loved in vain, thought the patient. "Go on," he said aloud.

"I loved her youthfully, tempestuously, unthinkingly; and when the reaction came it was too late."

"You had married?"

"No: I am speaking of before Catherine's time, or, at least, before the time of my marriage with her."

"Ah!"

"I began to mistrust her."

"You are not speaking of Catherine?"

"No. I doubted her fidelity, her love for me. It seemed somehow that I had been entrapped by her into a difficult position. The idea of marriage, at any rate, was particularly distasteful to me at the time; and I would not marry her. She tried very hard before the child was born; I was sorry for her, but immovable. I could not, you see, come quite to believe in her; her protestations failed to convince me. There may have been some sort of temperamental antagonism at the bottom of it all, which was responsible for the vague, undefined suspicions which restrained me."

"She allowed me to contribute to the support of the child—a boy, although with a wilful independence, or, perhaps, to cause me pain, she would take nothing from me for herself. Well, some time after this incident I married Catherine,—a discreet, respectable affair which settled me in my practice. Catherine and I have rubbed along pretty happily, but we have had no children. Was there a sort of judgment in that, I wonder? Perhaps. I have at times half thought so."

"However that may be, I came in time to be instinctively drawn towards her child—and mine. She consented to my seeing him, a fine brave little fellow, with my own eyes looking at me from his head. To see him, this part of me, to be with him, was the greatest happiness I had known: to watch his gradual development, to listen to his ingenuous prattle, to be vanquished by him in a bout of repartee, to take him, all unsuspected, to the Zoo or to a pantomime. You can't realize it! how the impulses and objects of his little life became entwined in mine, inseparably, always! Little! He has grown; his ideas already bear the impress of manhood. I have had him as decently educated as possible; she would not let him be out of her sight for long. And I hoped eventually to be able to send him to Oxford and give him the chance of a career."

"You hoped? . . . Has he died then, too?"

"He is alive and well, I trust! only she has never forgiven me. Perhaps I was mistaken, unreasonable; perhaps I should have married her. It might have been happier. If one could only foresee!"

"Who was she? Do I know?"

"Possibly. I think so, if you can now remember."

"Who?"

"Beatrice"—

"West!"

"Ah! You remember!"

"I remember," said the patient with closed eyes.

"You are in pain?"

"No, no; go on."

"She has never forgiven me!" The doctor's voice ringing out in all its natural vigour sounded strangely unnatural in the silence of the sick room. "She has, after all these years, taken her revenge, a triumph of ingenious cruelty. . . . I had not seen him—them—for a few weeks, and yesterday, I received a letter from her inclosing a photograph of the boy, refusing any further assistance from me on his account, as he can now earn a little for himself, and forbidding my ever seeing him again. Of course—you will understand—I went immediately, but they had gone! . . . What will become of him—of me!"

"Does Catherine know?"

"Yes—now. She came across her letter and the boy's photograph. In my anxiety I had been careless. She bore it very well. I don't think it will make much difference. Women—all but Beatrice—are indulgent; they understand and forgive. But I shall feel a difference."

The doctor was silent.

By-and-by he heard the voice of his patient, which had become suddenly feeble, sunk to the faintest whisper, so inaudible that he had to put his ear close to the struggling lips to catch what was said:

"Yes, I—knew Beatrice West—I loved her—I would—have married her—"

The doctor shot a quick, startled look of inquiry into his friend's eyes in which there beamed a brilliant light, a light, which, as he looked, became fainter and fainter, flickered a little, and then went out for ever.

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